**Kontum**

**A. GENERAL**

Kontum province has many times been the scene of battles. Even during the First Indochina War, this particular part of the highland witnessed some of the most vicious war actions that resulted in the fall of Kontum City to Communist control a little before the end of the first Vietnam conflict.

A little before the signing of the Geneva agreement on Vietnam in July 1954, three mobile groups under the command of Colonel Nguyen Khanh (GM 11), Sockell (GM 41) and Jaud (GM 42) destroyed in this part of the country. A better understanding of the situation would be arrived at if one knows that these mobile groups were elite units with glorious achievements in the past.

A fourth mobile group, GM 100, which came here from Korea also was to be completely destroyed during its retreat from An Khe to Pleiku. Its destruction took place along the Mang Yen which was to remain famous ever since.

Following the withdrawal of the French Army from Indochina, this very important region came under control of the Vietnamese Infantry Division. It was thought at the time that at least a division-sized force was needed to keep this part of the country secure and help with its economic development.

Many years later, in 1960, Communist troops tried to make their presence felt in this area. It was to take the form of a big battle at Dak Rota, that rocked the nation when it took place. At the time, only a battalion was destroyed but the Second Indochina War had barely started and the development was viewed in South Vietnam indicating a most terrible trend.

Three years later, another battle took place in the district of Toumorong resulting in heavy damages to Battalion and the death of the district chief.

Following the arrival of US troops in Vietnam, the situation grew more intense with such battles as those fought at Con Thien, Phuoc Qua. Kontum again was to serve as the scene of important battle in November 1967. In this encounter which took place at
the district of Dakto, each side threw in an estimated 15 battalions and the battle raged for over three weeks before it died down.

Following this, however, the Communists withdrew to border areas where they are known to maintain at least eight regiments of troops used to secure their infiltration routes. The presence of so many Communists was viewed as indicating war may erupt in Kontum at any time.

Kontum province is one of the largest administrative divisions of the land but it includes only 104,000 people. Of these, the government of Vietnam controls some 82,000 including the 30,000 residents of Kontum city and its suburbs who are mostly Catholic. Government control in the neighboring area prior to the Tet offensive can only be estimated at one sixth of the provincial territory.

Friendly defense installations in Kontum province were concentrated around two places: the city of Kontum and Dakto. Although artillery pieces in either center could not reach the other, they facilitate the defense task to a great extent as they could be used as bases for operations reaching far into Communist-held territory.

Kontum city was defended by three friendly forces, one under the direction of the sector command, another belonging to the 24th Special Zone and the third being American troops. Besides, there is another force of minor special force manpower, called the B12 detachment.

The sector command had 25 RF companies with 2,670 men plus 2,884 PF militiamen guarding outposts and distant villages. Three PF companies were in charge of guarding government offices.

Besides some specialized units the 24th Special Zone's organic units were the 403rd and 406th Recon Companies and the rational control unit was the 42nd Independent Regiment with two battalions - one standing by at the Special Sector headquarters and the other stationed in Dakto, where the regiment staff operated. The Special Zone's force also included the 221st Artillery Battalion, divided into two elements stationed in Kontum and Dakto, the 202nd Engineer Company and an M41 tank squadron stationed in Kontum.

The American force included the 173rd Airborne Brigade stationed in Dakto, a number of armed helicopters at the Kontum airfield, which was expanded recently, and a number of CIDG
units commanded by American officers and stationed in distant outposts.

The enemy had been expected to assault the city for some time. But it was not until on the night of Tet's Eve, Jan 30, that he really executed his assault plan. The Kontum city assault took place two days after the enemy attacked Dakto town, where the 42nd Regiment Command was headquartered.

B. - SEQUENCES OF THE ASSAULT

At the stroke of 2 AM Jan 30, the enemy unleashed ferocious shelling barrages on the 24th Special Zone Command headquarters, the Kontum airfield and the city's administrative section. He followed it up some fifteen minutes later with an infantry attack on the latter section. The ground assault was coordinated with the surprise raids by his sapper squads, which had quietly sneaked into this and other areas around midnight as innocent looking Tet holidayers.

The enemy struck very swiftly and effectively any points where there were no government troops or only small groups of defenders. At the position of the 204th Political Warfare Company he killed all the four soldiers and the commanding officer. He overran it and the neighboring government offices such as the post-office, the information service, the elementary education service and all of the unmanned bunkers. He also spread into the residential and shopping sections of the city easily. But he could not invade military installations and bases, which he chose to surround and isolate from the rest of the city. These points included the Kontum province administrative office, the province chief's residence, the treasury office, the city police station, the logistical administration company, the Army Security compound, the city's military command, the Zone Commander's residence, the Military Police Station etc...

The enemy employed an estimated two battalions to occupy the unguarded or lightly guarded sections of the city, as part of an estimated two regiments committed to the offensive on the city and its military sections. These two battalions made up the column of the enemy force. They were reinforced by a number of guerrillas and suicide squads and assigned to seize these semi-military sections of the city to start a planned popular uprising to bolster the offensive forces and to give the offensive a touch
of popular revolution.

The second column of the enemy's offensive forces consisted of the 24th VC Regiment, assigned to support the first column and the proposed enemy administration to be set up in Kontum following a successful takeover of the city.

Specifically, the first column bore the brunt of the ground offensive, with the 406th Battalion, which included the C207, C208 and C209 companies, reinforced by commandos and sappers.

The second column played a supporting role, to supply troop replacements, supplies and equipment, and to block Vietnamese and allied reinforcements. It included the K4, K5 and K6 Battalions of the 24th VC Regiment. The K5 Battalion was especially assigned to reinforce the first column's 406th Battalion. The second column itself was reinforced by the X200 Mountain Light Artillery Battalion, which had been assigned to harass the city's key military installations that night, but which failed to do so for unknown reasons.

In his attack on the 24th Special Zone compound, the enemy broke into the nearby officers' housing quarters and, through intelligence data obtained previously, called on each and every officer residing there by his name and rank to come out and surrender. But these officers had escaped moments before he arrived. Only the family of 3rd Lt Vien, who worked for the Zone Intelligence Department, fell victim to enemy atrocity. The lieutenant was at home when enemy guerrillas came. But he ignored the latter's challenge to open the door, causing them to hurl grenades into his home. The blasts killed his little child and wounded his wife, who lost a leg. The lieutenant managed to escape while enemy terrorist were looting canned food and some ducks. Some enemy agents also came to the house of Maj Hoang Khac Minh, Kontum deputy province chief in charge of security, for a similar attempt. But they simply left it as they found out that the house was guarded by some eight militiamen, besides the major himself. They also passed by the city jail, delivering harassment fire and then left. The jail was defended by one RF platoon. The same held true of the B12 command headquarters.

By and large, the enemy's first column failed to achieve its main objectives as the night wore on to an end. But it
parently wanted to stay and fight, rather than pull out after normal
enemy ground attack pattern. The province chief, an army lieutenant
colonel, called for reinforcements from the 24th Special Zone Com-
mander, Lt Col Nguyen Trong Luat, whose residence had been defend-
ed by a platoon detached from the Battalion 2/4.

The city's defenders started their counter-offensive
around 0600h. The first counter-offensive force included the under-
strength Battalion 2/4 supported by the Tank Squadron 11/3 with four
141 tanks. Two of these tanks were left behind to guard the Special
zone compound, while the other two were assigned to support two
companies on a two-pronged counter-offensive on the enemy positions
in the administrative area. One of these two tanks were assigned to
pick up Zone Staff Chief Maj Bui Duc Tai who just escaped from his
house through an enemy cordon. He left behind his wife and four
children at the house, which was kept off the enemy hands by troops
guarding the adjoining Zone Security Service office. This tank opened
fire on enemy positions around this office, picked up Maj Tai safely
and moved up to the administrative area to carry out its assignments,
but it did not go very far, as one round of B40 rocket grenade set it
ablaze. Maj Tai jumped out of the tank and ran for his life. The inci-
dent took place at the height of Phan Thanh Gian Street, behind the
province chief's office and residence.

The other tank supported the counter-offensive troops
effectively in the same general area, blasting the enemy out of the
buildings, which he had occupied at the start of his offensive. With
its support the first infantry company recaptured the post office, the
elementary education service and the radio communications station.
The company commander, 3rd Lt Huynh Van Theo was wounded. An-
other 3rd lieutenant took over but was hit later. The second company
was then dispatched to reinforce the first one to recapture the entire
area. Led by 3rd Lt Ve, the relief company succeeded in retaking it
most completely. Some fifty enemy bodies were counted on the
ground, besides some 11 assorted weapons. One enemy was shot in
the back and killed by his comrades in arms when he raised up his
hands in an attempt to surrender.

Around noon on Tet Day, Jan 30, or about ten hours
later the enemy started his ground assault on the city, the city's
administrative area was recaptured and under control of government
troops. But the enemy still held the Bac Ai (Charity) pagoda and the
city market place, and the adjoining civilian residential and business
areas, from which he directed sniper fire at passing troops. Maj Son, deputy city commander while riding on the backseat of an army 3rd lieutenant's Honda motorbike from their homes to the City Command headquarters was killed while passing this area and the lieutenant was wounded.

The enemy attempted repeatedly to enter the predominantly Roman Catholic Tan Hung area in a suburban section, but was repelled by armed Catholic militia.

The 3rd Company was assigned to recapture the market place. It was led by Lt Hoang Quang Anh, who was later wounded in action. Master Sergeant Huynh Long Thien, who led a platoon to fight the market-based enemy, was killed on Le Van Duyet Street, a few dozen meters short of the market itself. So was the signals noncom who trailed behind him.

Lt Nguyen Lien Hoan volunteered to lead the assault on the market. He himself carried a 57mm recoilless cannon, which he fired with the help of a trooper. The market caught fire from the cannon's incendiary shells, driving most if not all of the enemy diehards out of the structure straight into the fire wall of a small ambushing army unit. This unit blocked the market's main way out to an adjacent residential area. Four enemy were killed by the cannon blasts, four others by the ambush party. The few survivors backed away and fled to the filling station opposite the rear base of the Battalion 2/4, near the airfield, to be intercepted by an American unit later in the afternoon.

Meanwhile, the Battalion 2/4 split itself into three groups including the battalion command and its third company defending the 221st Artillery base, its first and second companies defending the residence of the Special Zone Commander and adjoining compounds and a platoon sent back to the rear base for its defense.

Around 1830 hours, the enemy took revenge and attacked the city. The Special Zone's ammo dump took a direct hit and was two thirds destroyed. The secondary explosions lasted seven hours. The friendly artillery pieces opened counter-battery fire with unknown results.

By 2100 hours, the enemy reentered the city for another ground assault. His K5 Battalion attacked the Special Zone Command compound and its subsidiary installations.
Battalion and a mortar company assaulted the Interrogation Center and the B12 command headquarters as well as the adjoining American billet. Nowhere did the enemy achieve his objectives since his battalions being badly understrength and his men weary following a hectic day of fighting elsewhere. The accurate counter battery fire by friendly artillery destroyed the enemy's mortar company at the beginning of the assault and helped throw back both enemy assaults.

But fighting continued to rage during the rest of the night. A sweep operation conducted by friendly troops in the same general area turned up 20 enemy bodies and three 82mm mortars. The night fighting at the latter stages involved the enemy's 304th provincial Mainforce Battalion and 406th Sapper Battalion. Both were understrength. These units resumed the assault.

The enemy directed his big guns at the installations thanks to well dug fortifications and the presence of many troops so hurriedly returned to their camp, all communist assaults failed. A depot of military gear, however, was set afire.

At night, flares hung over the sky and the government troops were effectively supported by air and artillery.

On the second day of the holiday season, government forces again were dispatched to restore order in the city. Since their numbers were limited all they could do was sweep areas immediately dering on the administrative military sections. They were also receive some help from US troops coming in from the direction of the Da Bla bridge.

Reinforcements sent to relieve enemy pressure at the assaults of the 204th Polwar Company counted 12 communists dead. Knowing this they tried to liberate the Bac Ai Pagoda where a strong enemy force had entrenched itself. They were not able to dislodge enemy forces but had to call in artillery while US troops blocked streets leading to the cemetery. It took government troops several assaults before they reoccupied the pagoda. About 50% of the pagoda was destroyed during the fight.

During the second day of the holiday season enemy forces still kept to downtown areas but they failed to occupy any of the administrative and military installations in the city. At all hours all the troops on sweep operations returned to the barracks.

In the evening huge US Chinook helicopters had brought...
some ammunition to the 221st Artillery Battalion to prepare the local garrison for any eventuality. There had been some indications that the communist might attempt something big against the headquarters of the Special Zone and the local MACV compound.

Later developments were to prove that the Viet Cong had directed all their strength to this decisive battle. Battalion K. 5 was assigned to attack the headquarters of the 24th Special Zone. Battalion K. 6 was assigned to attack the command post of the B.12 Special Forces unit and the MACV compound, while Battalions 304th and 406th were assigned to attack the administrative section of the city. Battalion K. 4 was to serve as general reserve.

On the friendly side, besides organic units of the Special Zone, there were two additional fighting units: Battalion 2/42 and the 406th Reconnaissance Company.

Here follows the synopsis of the fighting in Kontum:

2000 Hours: The attack began with an assault on the residence of the local commander and the administrative headquarters, which was followed by harassment fire against the 221st Artillery Battalion, Battalion 2/42 and Company 406/TK. Meeting with heavy resistance the enemy withdrew.

2120 Hours: A four-pronged attack against the headquarters of the 24th Special Zone was attempted at the same time as smaller assaults against various units in the city were made. The situation quickly grew serious and the defenders had to radio for reinforcements.

2130 Hours: With artillery pieces and helicopter gunships firing point blank at the assaulting enemy troops the frontal attack on the headquarters soon stopped. However, harassment fire continued against the Fourth Engineer Company and Company 406/TK.

2135 Hours: Communist troops appeared at the Highland Language School only to be fired at by artillery pieces set up at the base camp of the 221st Artillery Battalion, the B.12 Command Post, and the MACV compound. Meanwhile, airplanes tried to cut enemy withdrawal routes. At 2220 hours a short lull set in.

2230 Hours: The fight continued with Viet Cong gun-mortaring the police headquarters and the airport. Allied planes strafed enemy positions near the Bac Ai Pagoda and the provincial treasury buildings.
0050 Hours: Communist troops again assaulted the residence of the local commander and the southern section of the B.12 Command Post but were repelled. In these attacks enemy troops also used B.40 rocket launchers. Following this a lull of sorts prevailed for about one hour.

0220 Hours: A final attempt was made against the base camp of the 221st Artillery Battalion but it failed thanks to the intense counter fire of the garrison.

0340 Hours: Communist gunners pounded the gasoline depot starting an immense fire. Following this, other communist troops assailed the military section of the city but were soon repelled. By early morning all was quiet in Kontum City.

In this first night of the communist offensive, the Special Zone headquarters and the B.12 Command Post had respectively ten and two soldiers wounded by mortar explosions. As the assailants approached their targets the local garrison, aided by point blank artillery fire, killed a record number of enemy soldiers.

The following morning members of the 221st Artillery Battalion were the first to venture out to collect enemy weapons. They were to find two 75mm recoilless rifles, three 82mm mortar tubes, two 60mm mortar tubes, two anti-aircraft machineguns, one M.79, 7 machineguns and 50 AK.47 and AK.50 automatic rifles. Troops from Battalion 2/42 only collected 17 individual weapons as they were a little late in getting out of camp.

The commander of the 221st Artillery Battalion was so pleased with the war booty that he himself counted the weapons captured on that occasion. Unfortunately, he was wounded in the foot by an accidental explosion. This did not dilute his joy at seeing over 200 enemy soldiers lying dead all around his camp. Those bodies became a threat to public health and had to be burned and buried collectively.

In the morning of the third day of the Year of the Monkey, many people from the suburb of Vo Lam entered the city following an attack on the area held by the communists by Battalion 2/42 (-) and Reconnaissance Company 406.

A little before dark a group of F.105 arrived to relieve enemy pressure on the northeast front of the headquarters while the local garrison continued to sweep the city for remnants of the retreating Viet Cong. In the evening the artillery battalion received some
additional ammunition from a fleet of Chinook helicopters.

At nightfall fighting was renewed throughout the city but the enemy failed to achieve anything except setting afire a fortress of the B.12 command post and a building of the base camp of Battalion 2/42.

In the early morning of the fourth day of year of the Monkey two US companies in conjunction with Battalion 2/42 (-) and a group of armored cars, reoccupied the Highland Language School and the area of Vo Lam. The enemy, however, still made his presence felt throughout the city with harassing fire directed at the administrative headquarters and by sending a few rounds of mortar that exploded near the command post of B.12.

By noon that day a convoy of ammunition escorted by tanks arrived from Kontum. But according to the troops, a sensation of apprehension prevailed all through the mission as it was everyone's guess that the communists may attempt to ambush the moving column. No ambush, however, was recorded.

At nightfall and later in the evening enemy gunners again pounded the city. Dozens of warheads exploded, especially in the headquarters area of the Special Zone, resulting in the death of several combatants, including two officers, they were 2nd Lt. Huynh Trong from the 21st Dalat Military Academy class, deputy commander, and 3rd Lt. Pham Hong Duc from the Thu Duc Office Training School's 25th class. Lt. Duc had done the fighting for three days only.

On the fifth day of Tet, Feb 3, the sweep operation still continued throughout the city. Tanks opened fire on a number of civilian houses and the city's Buddhist compound, which were suspected of having a number of Communist diehards. But these fled out of town sometime in the preceding night.

The enemy appeared to be unable to launch any full ground offensive during the following days, but still maintained pressures on the city with harassing shelling. These lasted more than one month and mostly happened at night. All of the enemy shelling attacks were conducted with short range rockets of the 107 and 122 types, launched from a few jungle sites about ten kilometers away. One key rocket launching site was destroyed by a B.52 blanket bombing strike, which resulted in six enemy killed and a launching
The result of the B. 52 strike was ascertained by a ground party scouring the area the following day. From that day on for several following months, there was no further enemy rocketings against the city.

There was no denying that most of the enemy rocket attacks scored direct hits on the city's major installations. Not a single installation was left untouched. All were damaged more or less, if not destroyed. Soon after the enemy stopped his rocketing campaign, friendly troops started repairing the major installations. During the campaign, soldiers' families evacuated their dependents' camps and moved to live temporarily in civilian residential sections and suburbs. As a matter of fact, the campaign took only a few military or military dependent casualties.

Right in the wake of the enemy's ground offensive on city, the local garrisons strengthened their defense positions by new fixtures, ranging from barbed wire, mine-studded defense emplacements around camps to new, more solid defense bunkers and trenches. The province administration headquarters was among the best carefully defended structures. On the other hand, the people built their own defense with new barbed wire gates and fences at streets and alleys, popular self defense units with newly supplied weapons, checkpoints and last but not least, sandbagged shelters in their homes and gardens.

The people had built their own shelters before the result, when the Dakto battle reached its height a few weeks before. This precautionary measure paid off handsomely, as proved by the very low rate of civilian casualties suffered during the five-day Kontum offensive and counter-offensive. Only twelve civilians were killed.

Besides the Kontum offensive, the enemy attacked two outposts at Trung Nghia and Hill 716, each manned by one RF company which became understrength and also unprepared for effective defense because of the Tet holiday. The two companies had a combined total of 31 killed and 34 wounded. The Trung Nghia outpost was recaptured soon after it was overrun, while the Hill 716 outpost destroyed by the enemy during his occupation, did not back into commission until two months later and then only much reconstruction work.

Kontum people warmly welcomed the government troops.
everywhere they went, even while fighting still raged in other sectors of the city. They offered drinks and food to the troops and said encouraging words to them. However, some were just bewildered over the fact that government armor vehicles opened cannon fire on civilian homes while fighting the enemy.

Popular support resulted in, among other things, the discovery and elimination of several city-based enemy cells and agents. Regrettably enough, these included a shapely, pretty girl, Tuong, owner of the city’s well patronised Cao Nguyen Restaurant, her younger sister and her brother, a Kontum policeman. The three were arrested, confessing to having spied on government troops and installations for the enemy.

Most of the enemy captives showed signs of repentance. A few, especially wounded captives, did not stop cursing and swearing. One even refused a cigarette offered him by his captors. But moments later, when he finally realized that all the enemy prisoners of war were decently treated, he accepted not only the cigarette he had refused but the whole pack given him.

Because of supply difficulties caused by the fighting in the city and other provinces, prices skyrocketed in Kontum, except for the locally-grown vegetables. A bottle of local beer cost 80 piastres (over three times the Saigon price), an average dish of rice, eighty piastres, too (or about four times the Saigon price).

The enemy offensive on Kontum, however, exerted a good psychological impact among the local young folks. Many of these people volunteered for army service, some of them having been onetime draft dodgers. All of the city’s army units reached full strength by the influx of new volunteers. All regular army units were equipped with up-to-date fast firing M16 automatic rifles, which helped boost the troops’ morale even further. Another major morale booster was the victory gained during the Tet days.

However, the Kontum battle was a costly affair for both sides, though the kill ratio was nearly ten to one in favor of the city defenders. The casualty lists were like this:

Friendly side: 54 killed and 135 wounded. Not one weapon was lost to the enemy. The dead included 17 killed at the sector command compound and 37 at the Special Zone Command compound. Those wounded included 46 at the Sector Command and 89 at the Special...
Battalion 2/42 alone suffered 15 killed and 20 wounded in action. Those friendly troops killed included 2 rural development (RD) cadremen and 6 policemen, who were members of the country's para-military forces.

Enemy side: about 500 killed, 38 captured, one surrendered and 151 assorted weapons seized. Airstrikes accounted for a larger part of the enemy killed mostly on his retreating routes. The enemy casualties may run higher, as those listed here did not include those inflicted by American units stationed in the city.

C. - THE DAKTO BATTLE

The enemy began his offensive on this district town called Dakto or Tan Canh about 50 kms northnorthwest of Kontum out of small-group infiltrations into town early on the morning of Jan 28 or two days before Tet Day. Among others, one enemyatoon was completely wiped out soon after infiltration. All of its weapons were seized. It was ambushed by an eight-man army unit with M79 grenade launchers.

Actually, this district town has two almost distinct sections: one called Tan Canh, mostly inhabited by military dependents and a small number of tradespeople, with about 2,000 civilian people; the other is the Dakto administrative and military base some three kms north. Inside Tan Canh town, the 42nd Regiment set up its field command, and this area was called Tan Canh sensitive area. Tan Canh town lies at the foot of a hill, on top of which was the sensitive compound, guarded by only one army squad of about 12 men. Dakto town had, among other things, a police station handling civilian security affairs.

The enemy had attempted to raid both these army and police bases on the same morning of Jan 28, with a company of his Battalion 2/174. He was detected accidentally by a few government troops. Alerting, the duty officer, Lt Nien, sent out six men led by Master Sergeant Ngo to confirm the fact. The group moved downhill in a jeep to the market place, where enemy troops were last spotted. They stationed his men on both sides of the market and called for two more men with M79 grenade launchers. The jeep was used to run uphill, where the command headquarters of the 42nd Regiment was stationed, to bring in more grenades and also to mislead enemy intelligence. The plan worked beautifully, as the enemy withdrew soon after Sgt Ngo's small ambush party opened fire from both
sides of the market. The sergeant and another man of his fired some 300 rounds of M79 grenades at the surprised enemy in the clash. Two light machineguns of the ambush party also did a fine job. The enemy fled, leaving behind his dead and 15 weapons, including one mortar and one heavy machinegun.

Major Dinh The Thoai, who commands the 42nd Regiment, ordered the collection of Viet Cong bodies and weapons to be shown to the public at the local stadium.

But a second battle was to take place in Tan Canh in the first hours of the Year of the Monkey. As in Kontum city, the people in Tan Canh had just celebrated the passing of the old year and the advent of the new year when gunfire could be heard.

As on the previous occasion the enemy’s presence was betrayed before he actually attacked GVN installations. The alert was given when a government soldier escaped from the Viet Cong and informed the authorities of the advancing coming units. He had been part of a five man antenna dispatched to watch enemy movements from a pagoda just outside the small town.

In the cold night of the highlands, all the five men soon entered the pagoda for their night’s rest. A group of communist soldiers who had been secretly following their movement and immediately entered the pagoda and killed them with knives. Of the five men, only one escaped. He immediately reported the incident to headquarters.

The sergeant who had been on duty that night at once reported to his superiors, then he took a squad of troops to block the infiltration route the enemy had used on a previous occasion. He was killed in the ensuing battle, another hero simply known to his comrades-in-arms as Sergeant Nganh, but the enemy was stopped.

Immediately after reception of the report of an impending communist attack friendly artillery pieces had pounded at all suspected enemy troop concentrations. By five o’clock in the morning a company size reaction force entered the town.

The commander of the 42nd Regiment was personally commanding this small force while his deputy took upon himself the task of bringing to the barracks some of those on leave on that sacred day.
Major Dinh The Thoai, Commander of the 42nd Regiment, talking with a VC returnee.

Pictures of the fighting in Dakto
The local US garrison also dispatched a group of tanks to support the advancing troops but the first armored vehicle to arrive at the marketplace was hit by a B.40 grenade that broke parts of its tread. It took the government soldiers all morning before they were able to dislodge the enemy from the downtown section.

The situation at the Tan Canh pagoda was a little more difficult as enemy troops, taking advantage of the higher ground there, repulsed all attempts by government soldiers to take the position. It took Major Thoai the whole day to dislodge the enemy from the pagoda. The pagoda finally came under government control in the evening.

In this battle the enemy had deployed a battalion of troops but only about two companies had arrived in time for this encounter that cost the communists over 100 dead. Friendly losses were 14 killed and over 30 wounded.

D. - REMARKS

Following the victory, Major Bui Duc Tai, the chief of staff of the 24th Special Zone made the following comment on the battle of Tan Canh.

"If the enemy had had two regiments of troops and had deployed them against the administrative section and the headquarters of the Special Zone, the outcome of the battle could have been different.

"But the communist commander was too subjective in his assessment of the situation. His troops, fighting in that night of joy, were only given the task of attacking the administrative section, while the Special Zone's headquarters where one battalion of infantrymen and a group of tanks were garrisoning was not touched.

"Not having to defend themselves these units immediately fanned out for a counterattack. Therefore when the enemy decided 24 hours later to throw in more troops the defense of the headquarters had been organized. Thus his future attacks repeatedly failed.

"In the following days all military activities of the communists in this area were the simple deeds of a blind man unable to see around."

The enemy succeeded easily in infiltrating the city but failed in taking over even poorly guarded military installations. What had been behind this failure? Perhaps, the enemy force had spread itself too thin. At the same time, the light infantry regiment was that the communist commander had concentrated to repulse the enemy. The first few companies of enemy units to the south were MACV commandos and artillery. During the morning of the battle, the commandos and artillery were completely successful.

The only garrison left in the city was that of the 40th Division which had previously been completely destroyed. The division is comprised of three regiments, one of which was stationed at Tan Son Nhut. When this regiment was destroyed, the whole division became small in size and was eventually destroyed by the communists.

The communists also attacked the MACV commando in the coastal area of the 18th Division in Binh province. Perhaps this heavy enemy force had collapsed. The communists then concentrated their garrison and attacked the 22nd Infantry Division. The 40th and 18th Divisions of the division had been formed at the
spread itself too thin to take over all the scheduled objectives at the same time.

Another tactical mistake committed by enemy commanders was that the enemy failed to bank on the factor of surprise and concentrate larger manpower to take over the key installations during the first few hours of his offensive. Instead, he committed only small units to the attack, among others, the Special Zone Command and MACV compounds, located in the middle of a vast plot of flat, barren land. During these attacks he took heavy casualties from airstrikes and artillery fragmentary shells exploding in mid-air.

As far as the friendly forces were concerned, they were only garrison troops with short-term defense capabilities and almost devoid of counter-offensive potentials. They were sorely overworked since they were thrown into the counter-offensive right on the following morning of Tet Day and throughout the day, and then called back for garrison defense duties at night. These troops had been placed under almost constant alert, for months on end prior to the enemy's offensive. They were understandably incapable of fighting the enemy on both the defensive and offensive right at the doorstep of their camps and barracks. Had the weather been bad enough to hamper airborne supplies and reinforcements, these garrisons may have been isolated, starved and wiped out by the outnumbering, determined enemy assault force. The defense of Kontum mostly depended upon the powerful US forces stationed there.

The first division stationed in Kontum was the 12th Division which was later renamed the 22nd Infantry Division. This division is composed of three regiments the 40th, 41st and 42nd which are positioned respectively in Kontum, Dakto, and Dak Sul. From these positions they dispatched battalion units to operate in border areas. When enemy pressure increased government control area became smaller. However, the 22nd Infantry Division had to move to the coastal area and make their headquarters in Qui Nhon city, Binh Dinh province. In 1965 enemy pressure on Binh Dinh province was heavy especially after the battle at An Lao where the garrison almost collapsed. The 40th Regiment was sent from Kontum to reinforce this garrison and later the 41st Regiment and the light command post of the 22nd Infantry Division moved to this area to meet the battle needs. The 40th and 41st Regiments were retained here causing the main CP of the division to move to Qui Nhon city. The 24th Special Zone was formed at this time to cope with the threat in Kontum. Perhaps for
that reason the 22nd Infantry Division did not return to Kontum although Binh Dinh province was satisfactorily secured in 1967 with the allied divisions positioned there namely; the Korean Tiger Divisions and the US 1st Air Cav. Division.)

Banmeth

province. It was a highland, it was only sparsely populated, and it was full of primitive tribal conceits. The Viet Cong used this area to store their arms and supplies, to plant small farms, and to establish communications with the border area since they had to be in contact with the Saigon government.

The battle was fought in April 1969, in the spring of that year, as the Viet Cong were building up for the final assault on Saigon. The battle was fought in the province. Loc Ninh was the target of the entire enemy attack, it was an important area to the Viet Cong. The town was about 3,500 meters in length and about 2,000 meters in width. It was a key point, a turning point, and a pivot point which had never been attacked before. With such a large area to defend, the Viet Cong had the advantage of taking over the local capital.

Vietnamese notation on the diagram into the population was never properly understood by the Viet Cong. The city defenders were able to deduce from the widespread damage which extensive fighting had occurred in the population.
A. GENERAL DEVELOPMENTS

Banmethuot is a small town and the capital city of Darlac province. It is located on a vast flat expanse in the Central Vietnam Highland. It is surrounded by centuries old jungles with scattered small tribal concentrations which are generally nomadic and live from minor farming and hunting. It has never become an important battle area since the midforties or the beginning of the Indochina War.

The city enjoyed relative calm and never served as an objective for a massive ground offensive from the Communists until the spring of 1968. This was due to the fact that Rade tribes, who accounted for the majority of the local population, resented Communism and the fact that the province itself had a food deficit, depressed area. Neither element favored Communist guerrillas or regular troops since they had to bring food, supplies and almost everything else all the way from North Vietnam through jungle trails.

The Communists were very much aware of this unfavorable situation. They brought in equipment and food for months before they unleashed the offensive. These supplies were infiltrated from their way stations and supply bases in Cambodian border areas. Their support personnel were recruited or drafted from among the lowlanders all the way from coastal provinces and from those who had settled in government sponsored land development colonies in the province. Local guerrillas were also provided them in this way. The entire enemy assault force, regular and irregular, was estimated at about 3,500 men. It foreboded great danger for the city garrison which had never faced such an overwhelming enemy force before. With such a large manpower commitment the enemy seemed intent on taking over the city and turning it into either a rear base or a political capital for the Communist led National Liberation Front.

After a week fighting the enemy failed to occupy any Vietnamese military installations or compounds. His force spread into the populated areas and engaged in seesaw battles against the city defenders who were supported by armor artillery and air strikes which extensively damaged the property and life of the local civilian population.
The 1/8 Tank Squadron and the 3/8 APC Squadron played the key part in the defense of the city and in defeating the enemy. The use of tank cannons, however, caused civilian casualties and property damage. Though these casualties and property damage were very regrettable accidents of war they were almost unavoidable.

The organic garrison soldiers of the 23rd Tactical Zone Command headquarters made up the only infantry unit defending the city. There were not many of them however. The enemy outnumbered and outgunned them.

Although the enemy was able to exploit the factor of surprise the failure of their attacks served to demoralize their fighting men. They elected to fight a defensive war from populated areas to include civilian houses and a few public buildings. Apparently they were ordered to stick to their positions and fight as long as possible and at all costs. Therefore their lost was heavier than the lost they suffered in jungle battles.

Commencing with the second day of their offensive the enemy units failed to stage any more assaults on any Vietnamese military compounds. They dug in and fought defensively. Many enemy positions were almost sitting ducks for Vietnamese armor and artillery. This style of fighting cost the enemy the highest combat casualties known in the city area since the beginning of the war.

Friendly forces suffered 148 killed, 315 wounded and missing. The 23rd Infantry Division alone suffered 112 killed, 265 wounded and three missing in action. Equipment losses included 45 weapons, three tanks and two armored carriers burned, four other armor vehicles damaged and a number of radio transceivers and vehicles.

The enemy paid dearly. They had 924 of their men and 143 captured, they lost 243 weapons including 46 which were served.

The civilian population also suffered severely 176 killed, 403 wounded and forced to live in eleven temporary refugee centers. Material damage included 3,319 houses destroyed completely and 479 houses at least 50% damaged, 18,823 persons were made homeless and military dependents suffered a sizeable portion of the casualties and property damage. There were 66 killed, 48 wounded and 328 houses destroyed with 323 housing units 50% damaged.
The Banmethuot treasury following the VC attack.

View of a battlefield in Banmethuot.
The following public buildings were left in shambles: the provincial administrative headquarters, the provincial guest house, the treasury service, the market place police station, the information service, the public servants housing and the official residences of the three deputy province chiefs.

The headquarters of the 232nd Artillery Battalion was damaged by 50% while the 514th transportation Company headquarters and the 8th Armor Squadron compound were 30% damaged.

B. THE GROUND ASSAULT ON THE CITY

The enemy had started applying heavy military pressure on city outposts such as the Lac Thien and Buon Ho sub-sectors as early as mid-January 1968. The 552 Ammo Dump in Banmethuot was a target of enemy sabotage by explosive charges.

The enemy launched a probing ground attack against the northwestern side of the city on January 28 or two days before the enemy's D-Day. The 23rd Tactical Zone reacted with a reconnaissance in force and made contact with the enemy. Despite this contact, friendly forces remained in doubt concerning enemy intentions.

Calm returned to the city the following day. It was a quiet day with the Tet truce proclaimed in Banmethuot as well as throughout the country. The people conducted their traditional Tet shopping spree. Only 30 per cent of the city's garrison were kept on routine guard duties while the remainder were granted Tet home leave to enjoy the year's greatest festival.

Everything seemed normal and quiet until 0135 hours, Jan. 31 or Tet Day when the enemy actually launched his massive ground offensive against the city.

The enemy offensive force estimated at some 3500 men consisted of the 33rd Regiment with four organic battalions, the 40th and the 301st Province organic Mobile Battalions and the Regional Guerrilla Companies H4, H5, H6 and H8.

The enemy attacked from three staging points, located in the northwestern and southeastern fringes of the city.

The first enemy attacking echelon, which was the 33rd Regiment, struck from the Ea Enao brook staging area in the
the southeastern side of the city. This area encompassed the compounds of the 22nd Infantry Battalion, the Sector Command, the 514th Transportation Company headquarters and a few minor military installations.

The second enemy attack column included the 301st and 301st Battalions hit the city's military section defended by the 231st and 232nd Artillery Battalions and the 8th Armor Squadron.

The third enemy grouping was spearheaded by the four regional guerrilla companies H4, H5, H6 and H8 which assaulted the city's populated areas.

The enemy apparently believed he could seize the entire city quickly with his superior manpower. He had planned to drive the civilians of Banmethuot into a spectacular pro-Communist mass rally to welcome his "liberation" soldiers and goad them into a popular uprising to seize power in this province. He had also planned to conduct popular marches into the city from distant areas such as Khue Dien village to bolster his proposed popular upheaval in Banmethuot proper. His military and political assault on Banmethuot had apparently been carefully blueprinted. His strategists believed their assault would be a complete success.

This apparent state of mind among enemy commanders troops explain the fierceness and ferocity of his assault during its early stages.

Things did not work the way they had planned.

The city appeared calm on the evening of Tet's Eve. The civilians had gone to bed after celebrating the traditional ritual to send the dying Year of the Goat and to welcome the incoming Year of the Monkey. Banmethuot citizens were sleeping soundly or hoping religiously that things and events would not go against them in the new year.

This dream turned into a nightmare for many of the celebrants indeed. The enemy opened fire with heavy mortar and artillery on the air base, the Division Command headquarters, the police administration office and adjoining public compounds. These were followed by massive infantry assaults on the city. Hardly any installations or sensitive points were spared. Even military camps came under enemy ground attack. Gunfire broke out everywhere. The enemy was seen roaming from street to street in the civilian residential and business sections of the city.
Following the VC attack, local military installations were given additional defense material.
At all military camps the enemy was checked by fierce, stubborn counter fire from the defenders. At the sector command compound 18 enemy bodies and six weapons were left behind. The enemy failed to storm the radio station which he later chose to surround. All of the enemy assaults were thrown back by soldiers of the 14th Transportation Company. The Artillerymen also stood their ground at times firing their howitzers almost level and at point blank range.

The enemy, however, succeeded in breaking into the province administrative headquarters, the treasury office, the 3rd financial administration office and the market place police station. Four policemen were killed and five wounded.

The Commander of the 23rd Infantry Division immediately launched a counter-offensive. The counterattacking forces consisted of the 8th Armor Squadron, the 45th Infantry Regiment with the Second and the Third Battalions and the 45th Recon Company, the latter was operating on the city's outskirts. The 413th, 409th, and 23rd Reconnaissance Companies, the 702nd RF Company, and the 23rd Ranger Company were brought in from the country to aid in the rescue of the embattled city.

The counter-offensive started around 0200 hours, about half an hour after the enemy unleashed his infantry assaults. The 8th Armor Squadron spearheaded the action.

One of the 8th Armor M41 tanks took a direct rocket hit and was stopped. The tank caught fire in the entrance to its base camp. This did not discourage the other tanks which stormed their way out firing all of their guns at enemy positions. They were under orders to relieve enemy pressures from all embattled or besieged military and administrative compounds, to guard all strategic points, and to prevent the enemy from spreading to other areas.

When the armor column reached the treasury office an armored personnel carrier (APC) took a direct hit from an enemy B40 rocket and began burning. This loss did not deter the column from moving further and carrying out its assignments. Moments later two more armored vehicles, one tank and one APC, took other direct hits and burst into flames.

The 8th Armor Squadron achieved all of its objectives around daybreak, though it had lost four of its vehicles. This was
regarded as a special feat since it was achieved by maneuvering in the dark and in the midst of numerically superior enemy equipped with the deadly B40 and B41 rocket launchers and other anti-tank weapons. The armored column's action served to boost the morale of the defenders who were emotionally and physically unprepared for such a massive assault by the enemy. At the same time it threw the whole enemy assault plan into disorder, if not disrupting it, to a point where he was pinned down at his initial position.

On the morning of Tet Day, Jan 30, the 45th Reconnaissance Company was twice engaged by the enemy, some 14 kms from the city, as they were on the way to rescue the embattled city. Having killed some 20 enemy and captured a few assorted weapons, including one mortar, the company could not reach the city until mid-afternoon.

In the meantime the government troops stormed out of their defensive positions, camps and compounds to initiate a counter-offensive and a city-wide sweep operation which would continue into the night.

Two platoons of the 23rd Reconnaissance Company which swept the Officers' housing quarter, captured three enemy. The 413th striking Reconnaissance Company, however, failed to dislodge the numerically superior enemy from the treasury office building. One armor detachment was sent to relieve enemy pressure at the station and lost one tank to anti-tank fire. Though out gunned the enemy still held out. Enemy pressure on the PF training camp, about 1 km from the radio station, were still heavy. Three PF men were killed and wounded in one of his assaults on the camp.

The 45th Regiment was also called in from the fields day. It was ordered to strike enemy positions from the rear. Its 1st Battalion engaged the enemy about one km from downtown, killing and capturing ten. Also captured were four weapons, including one mortar and one machinegun. The Regiment's 3rd Battalion, also striking from the rear, killed 70 enemy and captured 39 as well as taking 44 weapons including an antiaircraft machinegun. This occurred at Buon Kao hamlet just outside the city.

Enemy pressure inside the city was still very much evidence until dark. Around 1400 hours agitation propaganda succeeded in herding civilians into a small antigovernment demonstration. The crowd was swiftly dispersed by police. Friendly supported by tanks, maneuvered to block and defend all sensitive
strategic points in the city. They braced themselves for another day of fighting. The enemy apparently tired after a day of heavy fighting, also settled for a status quo during the night and confined his actions to harassing shellings only. The sector command compound was his favorite target that night. Not one infantry action was recorded from the enemy side.

At sunrise the 2/45 Battalion supported by the 3/8 APC Squadron launched an attack on the enemy held treasury building. This attack was conducted from two sides. On one side were the armored units and on the other the 3/45 Battalion, just called in as reinforcements. The solidly entrenched enemy held out ferociously. Until 1400 hours the best that friendly forces involved could do was to isolate the enemy from the remainder of his forces.

The infantry reinforced APC unit stormed into the nearby coffee tree garden killing eight enemy and seizing two weapons. The 3/45 Battalion on the other flank having returned from Buon-Kao hamlet attacked the Lasan hill killing 32 enemy and seizing nine weapons. This unit suffered 19 killed and 29 wounded in a very difficult uphill fight.

The enemy staged a daring diversionary counterattack in the nearby MACV compound and Imperial Palace as the government forces were trying to close in on the enemy positions inside the coffee tree garden. The APC unit and the 2/45 Battalion had to call off their siege against the treasury house in order to pursue the assailants in this area, which had previously been safe. Their action cost the enemy ten killed, two captured and four weapons.

The 2nd and 3rd Battalion of 45th assaulted the enemy positions inside the provincial administration compound and accounted for another 32 enemy killed, seven captured and 18 weapons seized. The 702nd RF Company was then assigned to guard the compound after it was freed from enemy occupation around 1900 hours.

As these two units pursued the enemy at the MACV compound, the Imperial Palace and the provincial administration headquarters, other government troops moved into the coffee garden to complete the assault against the enemy holed up inside. Included among these troops were the 45th Regiment Headquarter, the 45th Reconnaissance company and the 889th RF Company. By this time the weary enemy could only provide weak resistance. When the smoke cleared over the courtyard of the building thirty enemy bodies were
counted. There were 12 enemy captured along with four weapons, including one machinegun. The attacking force suffered two killed and four wounded.

A number of enemy diehards continued to hold out as night fell over the treasury building. From this building, they opened automatic weapon fire on the provincial administration compound and forced the 702nd RF Company guarding it to withdraw to the sector command compound.

No infantry action was recorded during the rest of the night. The enemy again confined his actions to only sporadic harassing shellings of night positions and military installations around town. There were no significant results. Major targets included the position of the 514th Transportation company, the province administration headquarters, the 23rd Division Command compound, the airfield for L.19 spotter planes and the 23rd Reconnaissance Company's dependent housing camp.

Around daybreak on the third day of Tet, Feb. 1st, the 377th and 702nd RF Companies assaulted the treasury office and the provincial administration headquarters. They were surprised to learn that the enemy diehards, who had survived many assault waves of armor supported friendly troops all the previous day, had evacuated the area under cover of night.

The 8th Armor Battalion and the 2/45th Battalion also conducted a sweep operation in the neighboring areas between 0800 hours and 1500 hours securing complete control of all the thoroughfares of this downtown area.

On the same day the 23rd Division Command devoted all of its available garrison troops to the task of sweeping the southwestern section of the city surrounding the Cho Nho (Small Market) area. The units involved included the 23rd Ranger Battalion and the 23rd Reconnaissance Company. The Major targets were the Protestant Church, the Finance Office No 3, the Lasan hill and the Cho Nho market plus the adjoining areas. The action was marked by sporadic scattered clashes with minor enemy elements which were apparently left behind to harass and delay. Fifty four enemy were killed, captured and sixteen assorted weapons seized. Friendly forces suffered 12 killed and 19 wounded.
On the third night of Tet, unlike previous nights when the enemy had confined his actions to sporadic harassment shellings, he launched an assault on the 232nd Artillery Battalion. This battalion had provided effective artillery support for friendly counterattacking troops at earlier stages of the Banmethuot battle. The enemy was left back leaving behind 17 killed, two captured, and five weapons. The 232nd Artillery battalion suffered two killed and five wounded in action.

The 3/45 Battalion, pursuing the retreating enemy force northwest of the artillery battalion's position shortly after daybreak, Feb 2, accounted for an additional 19 enemy killed, five captured, and three weapons.

Other units conducting sweep operations with armored support moved up to the besieged radio station and broke the enemy resistance.

The sweep operations continued on Feb 3 in the Cho Nho area and the adjoining Ale hamlet. At this hamlet the 23rd Ranger battalion found a sizeable mass grave with an estimated 200 enemy dead. The operation only resulted in scattered, sporadic firefight with unknown results. As darkness fell over the city the enemy again drilled it slamming 122mm rockets into the compounds of the Military Police Company, the intelligence section, the 23rd Ordnance Company, and the 23rd Transportation Company. There was only insignificant damage done to these installations and no reported casualties.

On the sixth day of Tet, or Feb 4, government troops carried out the last stage of their sweep operations. There was only engagement in town involving a pocket of diehard enemy resistance which was positioned on Hoang-Dieu street. This pocket was eliminated in a matter of hours and the entire city was brought back under complete governmental control for the rest of the day.

There was not one single enemy infantry assault anywhere in Banmethuot in the following days and nights. In the daytime government troops continued their systematic searches for possible enemy remnants or suspects hiding among the populace or in the rubble, during darkness and for several nights on end the enemy slammed rockets and mortar rounds into the city's key areas. The enemy still used to withdraw from the city outskirts. He was regrouping and operating for yet another offensive of sorts.
It was not until the night of March 3 or early in the morning of March 4 - or one month after the city returned to government control - that the enemy launched the much awaited second offensive on the city. It was a well coordinated ground and fire supported attack conducted from two sides - north and south. The enemy failed to create even a fraction of the amount and kind of trouble he had caused before. This action cost him over 100 killed. This operation also heralded the end of his Tet offensive, which trailed off with sporadic shellings in the last few nights of the campaign.
A. A FEW INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Quang Ngai city is hemmed between two rivers, the larger Tra Khuc River in the north and the smaller Ve River in the south. Both are fordable for most of the year. In the western end of the city there is an airfield capable of taking medium transport and cargo planes. Some eight kms east of the city is the South China Sea. In the eastern and western sides of the city are sugar cane fields. At several places some of these fields thrust into the city itself giving the city a semi-rural look. Towering over the city from the northwest and south respectively are Mont Ong and Mount But. These mountains are good key terrain features which afford government troops control over the city as well as large expanses of flat lands for several kilometers around the city. An artillery platoon was positioned on top of Mount But.

The old city was demolished by the Communist led Viet Minh in the early months of the Indochina War in 1947. It was rebuilt following its takeover by government troops in the wake of the 1954 Geneva Settlement of the Indochina War. The rebuilt city was smaller than the original one which was believed to have been built at the turn of the century.

The city sits astride National Highway No 1 and its main street is coincidentally a small section of this highway which links Saigon to Hanoi. This main street is also the city's business section with concrete shops, offices and businesses lining both sides for several kilometers. First time visitors to the city would find it difficult to tell where the city proper ends on this "highway main street". The ends of the main street belong to the city's suburbs.

The people of the city were predominantly non-Communist or anti-Communist. A large part of the population were followers of the Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang and Dai Viet Quoc Dang nationalist parties. The remaining people were either government employees or businessmen.

It was because of this demographic background that the enemy was not able to start trouble from inside the city during his
Tet offensive as he did in the case of several other towns and cities. He had to fight all the way from his bases which were far from the city.

B. DEVELOPMENT OF THE BATTLES

The enemy launched his offensive on Quang Ngai city on the morning of the Second Day of Tet, Jan 31, or more than 24 hours later than his offensives against most other I and II Corps cities. The attack did not start until 0400 hours which was only 2 1/2 hours before daybreak. This time had normally been the time for withdrawal for most guerrilla assault forces in the Vietnam War.

There never was any solid evidence for the reasons behind this delayed action. One educated guess was that the enemy apparently underestimated the ability of the city defenders to withstand his massive assault. The enemy thought that the city might be taken in a matter of hours. Why did he wait so long to unleash the offensive and thus fight in the daytime, a time which normally favored the Vietnamese forces with their artillery and airstrikes? Or had there been challenging logistical problems to solve before he could begin his attack? No enemy documents captured later gave any clue to a firm and clear answer nor did any statements by enemy soldiers captured in action.

The enemy opened a ten minute mortar barrage around 0400 hours on several sensitive areas in town including the 2nd Infantry Division Command headquarters, the RF and PF Training Center on the other side of the Tra Khuc River and other intown military installations such as the airfield and the provincial administration headquarters. The shelling which lacked accuracy and ferocity, caused no casualties and very light damage in the areas of impact. What more it woke up and prepared the defenders for attacks which soon followed.

The enemy launched his planned ground assaults as soon as his last round of mortar fire landed in town. Assaults were planned on at least ten military and administrative objectives to include the Mount Ong and Mount But bases, the 4th Regiment Command headquarters, the airfield, the city jail, the city police station, the Rural Development Service, the Provincial Administrative Headquarters, the 2nd Division Command and the RF and PF training center.
The enemy attack on the sensitive area in Quang Ngai City
THE ENEMY ATTACK ON THE SENSITIVE AREA IN QUANG NGAI AIRFIELD.
The home base of Battalion 3/4 was set afire early in the morning and the light of the fire helped the defenders to kill some 28 VC in this area.

Trenches near the bunker of the local transportation unit through which enemy troops had intended to penetrate the headquarters of the regiment.
Not all these ground assaults were of major dimensions. Only a few installations were hit with a massive enemy onslaught. The other attacks were just scattered diversionary actions. The enemy's major assaults were directed at the 2nd Division Command headquarters, the Provincial Administration Office, the city jail, the 4th Regiment Command compound and the militia training center. Apparently the enemy thought he could take over the entire city by just taking over or paralyzing these sensitive points.

The total enemy force involved in the offensive was estimated at about two regiments. Spearheading the action was the 401st Regiment which included the 406th, 407th and 409th Regular battalions. Additionally there were the 107th, 81st, 38th, 48th and 31st Regional Guerrilla Battalions reinforced by the 506A and 506B Sapper Companies and the 571st Engineer and H20 Transportation Companies. In the light of this massive assault force some people thought that the enemy might take over the city easily. There were many problems and shortcomings within enemy ranks which explain one of the worst enemy defeats in the war in this area.

The enemy had been bitterly defeated in his regimental size assaults on some district towns of Quang Ngai and Quang Tin provinces in the months preceding the Tet offensive. Attacks on the districts such as Hau Duc, Ly Tin and especially Nghi Hanh caused heavy casualties and equipment losses. The ensuing ground operations by Vietnamese and allied forces were even costlier for the enemy and his bases. They were costly to the extent that his ranks were disrupted in many areas and that his morale dropped rapidly. The enemy's Fifth Military Zone Command had to send two additional battalions, the 407th sapper from Kontum and the 409th from Quang-Nam, to reinforce the thinning ranks of Quang Ngai's fighting force. Capture enemy documents showed that the enemy failed to set up any underground espionage cells inside Quang Ngai city, local guerrillas' morale was comparatively poor, and his 4 month old 401st Sapper Regiment was still inexperienced, untested and virtually ineffective. Other enemy documents indicated that the enemy 5th Military Zone Command was dissatisfied with the Quang Ngai command's performance and even accused the latter of over estimating the adversary's strength and morale. The Zone Command ordered the province's Communist force to carry out a three point offensive plan in order to boost the morale of the Quang Ngai guerrilla and main force Communist units. The so called plan claimed that during 1967 the Zone's units killed 20,000 enemy (Vietnamese and allied) troops; downed
1,800 enemy planes and choppers; destroyed 1,800 armored vehicles and paralyzed most of the Vietnamese and allied forces stationed in the zone. It also claimed that the planned Tet offensive would be supported by simultaneous popular uprisings in Quang Ngai and other Zone cities and that there had been a secret agreement with the American forces that these would not move a finger when the Communists launched the Tet offensive. These enemy documents told Communist field commanders and political commissars that the offensive would certainly be a complete success if they followed the offensive blue prints.

The Quang Ngai city defense force and other army units, learning from past experiences with the 1967 Christmas and 1968 New Year truces which the enemy blatantly and seriously violated, were vigilant enough to anticipate enemy troop movements toward the city. Precautionary measures against possible enemy violations of the Tet truce were taken by the 22nd Tactical Zone Command.

The situation in Quang Ngai city and neighboring areas was generally normal on Tet's Eve, Jan 29. On Tet day, Jan 30, the city's key defense and administration agencies were alerted against a possible offensive on Quang Ngai as part of the enemy's general offensive on most cities and towns throughout the country.

Second Division Commander Col Nguyen Van Toan called all the troopers on Tet home leave back to their battle stations. Division Staff Chief Lt Col Pham Cao Dong personally went to each army unit to check on how many men reported to their battle stations. He came to the 2/4 battalion by mid-morning and saw only 50 men. The Battalion's strength rose to 250 men during the afternoon. The same held true of other units whose members had been granted home leave in or around town. He assigned the 3/4 Battalion to guard the Division Command as a reserve force.

Col Dong also ordered the people to stop firing firecrackers. Many people simply ignored this order which was actually an emergency counter order revoking the central government's authorization to set off firecrackers in celebrating the year's greatest festival.

The defense force approached its normal personnel strength by dark. Each and every unit remained in camp waiting, waiting and waiting. Patience wore thin by midnight. Some cursed others for the unjustified trouble. It was absolutely quiet outside the camps and barracks - or apparently so. The populace celebrated the new year
Around the airport of Quang Ngai and amid the sugar cane plantations nearby.

Enemy troop bodies about to be buried.
welcoming ritual as if nothing was going to happen. In the small hours of the night firecrackers were still heard in the various sections of the city.

During Tet day some of the city's defensive units were ordered to change their positions, some were reinforced and some were partly shifted elsewhere. These movements were aimed at disrupting the enemy's intelligence and assault plans.

Opposing the enemy's 48th Battalion and two local guerrilla companies were three PF platoons guarding the RF-PF Training Center. At the citadel the 3/4 Battalion minus, two RF companies minus, the 923rd and 983rd, plus the 1/4 APC Squadron were confronted by the enemy's 404th Sapper Battalion, 506A Sapper Company, 107 PK Battalion, 409th Sapper Battalion, and 84th Battalion also mostly understrength units. To cope with the enemy's C95 Company at the city jail were the 424th RF Company and two understrength PF platoons which normally guarded the sector command compound.

A major enemy force was committed to the assault against the airfield special zone command compound which was also the 4th Infantry Regiment's command headquarters. It included the 401st Regiment with the 407th, 20th and 38th Sapper Battalions as well as six companies C22, C16, C195, C74, 571 and 506B plus an 82mm mortar company. Ranged against these units were the 4/2 Regiment Command's garrison, its Second Battalion, an engineer company, a 105mm howitzer company, a 155mm howitzer platoon and a few miscellaneous units from platoon to company size.

Col. Nguyen Van Toan, Commander of the 12th Tactical Zone, directed the friendly forces' defense and counter-offensive from his headquarters from the beginning of the enemy's action. He was informed of each enemy movement from the east and south toward the headquarters compound through his telephone and radio network. He ordered the 1/4 APC Squadron to maneuver out of the compound to strike the enemy on his flanks some twenty minutes after the enemy assault started. The armor units drove the enemy into neighboring residential areas using lateral formations. Many enemy bodies were left behind at the horsecart station on Vo Tanh road and in the adjoining sugarcane fields. The enemy pressures around the vast zone command compound were broken only one hour later. The enemy chose to defend from the adjoining residential sections, mostly from civilian concrete houses. Not one of the armor vehicles involved in
this armor counterattack was hit by the enemy's deadly rockets. The enemy seemed to have been caught off balance. Some of these armor vehicles blocked the way to further enemy assaults while the others scoured the sugarcane fields for possible enemy survivors.

Prior to daylight no further assaults were launched by the enemy in this sector of the city. The enemy, however, refused to pull out of the residential areas at this time.

The situation on other fronts within the city also improved. All enemy assaults were thrown back except for those against the city jail and the RF-PF Training Center. These were overrun by the numerically superior force and fire power of the enemy shortly after the offensive began during the night. The enemy flew a flag on the hilltop training center and stood his ground waiting for the counterattack from the city defenders.

Air strikes were provided right after daybreak and enemy troops faded into neighboring civilian populated areas for cover. Armed helicopters strafed the jail which had been overrun around 0510 hours. Some 540 prisoners were freed by the enemy but a number of them were recaptured by government troops. The strafing of the jail cost the enemy forty killed. There were 21 prisoners killed and 21 wounded. The enemy's assault on the same jail earlier in the night cost its defenders six killed and eleven wounded. The bulk of the RF garrison at the jail pulled out in the face of the superior enemy force.

The enemy also suffered heavy casualties inflicted by the gunships in the airfield perimeter areas. He had attacked the airfield and the adjoining position of the 4th Regiment. The defenders equipped with the newly supplied M16 automatic rifles, delivered such surprisingly strong firepower against the enemy that it threw his ranks into disorder and rolled back his human wave assaults. The enemy seemed to have been unaware of this new improvement. The rear base of the 3/4 Battalion was overrun at one point and of its 20 defenders only three escaped wounds. Seven were killed and ten wounded. The three survivors joined the Regiment's 22 transportation troopers led by Master Sergeant Tran Quang Tu. After overrunning this rear base the enemy assaulted the Regimental headquarters which was defended by these 22 men plus the three survivors. The enemy was stopped and pinned down by these 25 men. These men occupied all the existing bunkers and fought with machineguns, light machineguns and grenades. Around 0500 hours a building of the 3/4 Battalion's rear base caught fire. The rear base was saved and favored. Twenty eight of the other enemy gun crew died. The night assistant, who fired at the hilltop hilltop training center, hurled a hand grenade and fell seriously wounded. The assistant was brought to a field hospital later. His right arm was permanently disabled. The enemy also suffered heavy casualties inflicted by gunships in the airfield perimeter areas. He had attacked the airfield and the adjoining position of the 4th Regiment. The defenders, equipped with the newly supplied M16 automatic rifles, delivered such surprisingly strong firepower against the enemy that it threw his ranks into disorder and rolled back his human wave assaults. The enemy seemed to have been unaware of this new improvement. The rear base of the 3/4 Battalion was overrun at one point and of its 20 defenders only three escaped wounds. Seven were killed and ten wounded. The three survivors joined the Regiment's 22 transportation troopers led by Master Sergeant Tran Quang Tu. After overrunning this rear base the enemy assaulted the Regimental headquarters which was defended by these 22 men plus the three survivors. The enemy was stopped and pinned down by these 25 men. These men occupied all the existing bunkers and fought with machineguns, light machineguns and grenades. Around 0500 hours a building of the 3/4 Battalion's rear base caught fire. The rear base was saved and favored. Twenty eight of the other enemy gun crew died. The night assistant, who fired at the hilltop training center, hurled a hand grenade and fell seriously wounded. The assistant was brought to a field hospital later. His right arm was permanently disabled.
The fire was so big that all the enemy positions were illuminated, and favored the transportation men's delivery of accurate gunfire. Twenty eight enemy bodies were counted at this place alone. Four other enemy were killed trying to knock out a bunker with a machine-gun. The machinegunner, Nguyen Can, was killed by this group. The assistant, Le Van Quoc, machinegunner swiftly took over the gun and fired at the four now only ten meters away from the bunker. He failed to kill them. In an apparent fit of anger Cuoc got out of his bunker and hurled a hand grenade at the four but was shot by the enemy and seriously wounded in the head. He was medically evacuated around daybreak to a US 7th Fleet hospital ship. He returned to duty one month later. His skull had been partly torn away by enemy bullets but his head was patched with a piece of his thigh skin.

In this battle around the 4th Regiment command compound, Regiment Commander Lt. Col Nguyen Van Lam was also wounded by enemy M79 grenade shrapnel as he was jumping from bunker to bunker to urge his men to fight harder against the enemy. In both legs and lightly wounded in his stomach Lt. Col. Lam continued to command his troops till 1000h., at which time he was medically evacuated by an American mercy chopper to a US 7th Fleet hospital ship. He returned to duty after two months treatment. His courage boosted the morale of the outgunned defenders and prevented enemy from capturing the regimental base.

Some 100 enemy were killed in this battle including a battalion commander and one company commander. Five enemy were captured along with 31 weapons which included 16 crew served weapons. The enemy also lost a number of mines and a telephone. Thirteen friendly troops were killed, 44 wounded, nine individual weapons and one binocular destroyed.

The enemy moved from the south and east toward the Infantry Division's base inside the citadel. He succeeded in breaking through two outer defense lines but only five enemy managed to get inside the citadel after blasting an armor personnel carrier blocking the gate. The carrier's driver managed to get out of his burning vehicle but was intercepted by an enemy with a knife. The two engaged in a deadly hand-to-hand fight which resulted in both falling into fire and burning to death. The other five enemy were killed minutes after they got inside the citadel.

Meanwhile, the 3/4 Battalion led by Captain Nguyen Thuan and supported by the 1/4 APC Squadron counterattacked
The Quang Ngai high school

The Quang Ngai Cathedral
The Quang Ngai prison

Viet Cong prisoners taken in Quang Ngai were mostly teenagers.
the enemy in the residential areas, especially at the Catholic owned Kim Thong school and the citadel's east gate. Throughout the morning neither of these friendly units ever succeeded in relieving enemy pressure from these areas because of the heavy enemy fire. Airstrikes were finally requested in the afternoon with the approval of the school's owner, the local parish priest. Some eighty enemy bodies were counted and 28 weapons, including one flamethrower, were seized in these areas. One armor Lieutenant and five men were killed and 19 men were wounded. One Company from the 3/4 Battalion, which blocked the enemy's route into the city from the east, engaged an advancing enemy force and inflicted serious casualties upon it.

In the east gate battle the 3/4 Battalion was so badly understrength that the Division command had to send one of its own garrison companies to reinforce the battalion. The company's commanding officer Capt Nguyen Van Thanh was killed by enemy sniper fire. Another division staff officer, Lt Dung, was also killed while trying to get back to his house to bring his family out of the enemy controlled area.

It was not until mid morning that an armor unit could be maneuvered into position for counterattack on the enemy held RF-PF Training Center on the other side of the Tra Khuc river. The Center was guarded by over twenty militiamen when the enemy launched the offensive early in the morning. The center's deputy commander, a Lieutenant, was killed along with some of his men. His boss, Maj Te and the other men withdrew to the Tra Khuc bridge and made their way to the position of the 4/4 Battalion for a counterattack. The hilltop center was lost to the enemy without the knowledge of the 4/4 Battalion. Thus, when some of the enemy came down the hill, the bridge guards thought they were RD cadre and did not open fire.

Actually only one company of the 4/4 Battalion was stationed at the Tra-Khuc bridge. The other two companies were being positioned about three and four kilometers away when the enemy started the offensive. The enemy was not aware of this fact and left the outnumbered Tra Khuc bridge guards alone when he stormed into the training center. He only fired one round of 60mm mortar at the bridge wounding two medics, 3rd Lt Hoa and Corporal Quy.

This was the third time in one year that this training center had fallen into enemy hands. One time the enemy disguised themselves as local villagers and came to watch the movie and took over the center in a surprise raid.
nh street, Quang Ngai

After the battle.
When Maj Te the center superintendent and his men reached the bridge, the 4/4 Battalion Commander, Maj Luong Van welcomed him into the camp and positioned the militiamen along the defense perimeter.

Around 0900 hours Col. Toan led a relief column supported by armored vehicles and Maj Hoi's understrength 4/4 Battalion toward an assault on the enemy held hilltop training center. Two gunships circled over the enemy positions and accounted for several enemy casualties. The enemy could not fight back from their exposed foxholes on the hill. They ran for cover in the center's four bunkers in order to fight the relief column. Col Toan ordered the armored carriers to attack uphill but one received a direct hit from an enemy 57mm recoilless cannon and burst into flames. The explosion scattered debris and shrapnel for several meters wounding the Battalion's American advisor, among others. The armored vehicles could not continue the attack uphill any longer not only because of the heavy firepower from enemy positions but also because of the hill's fairly steep slope. Col Toan ordered 4/4 Battalion to launch an assault within 15 minutes to recapture the hill. The gunships continued to give close air support from the skies while the armored vehicles and other support units provided covering fires to the assaulting force which was led by Maj Hoi. This assault force moved uphill fairly fast in lateral formation and as soon as it reached the top of the hill, it used hand grenades and jumped on all of the enemy diehards positioned in the four bunkers. The entire enemy force originally committed to take this hill was virtually eliminated. Besides recapturing all the equipment lost to enemy a few hours earlier, the assault force accounted for 92 enemy weapons, including 16 crew served weapons. One hundred and eight enemy bodies were counted on the ground and in bunkers and foxholes. Many of these casualties were credited to the effective strafing by two gunships. The friendly troops suffered seven killed including a Lieutenant Nguyen Duc Thu freshly graduated from the Thu Duc Officers Training School.

The guns became silent all over the hill area around 1115 hours. The people of Quang Ngai heard of the victory and swarmed to the area to see for themselves. Sporadic fighting was still going on elsewhere in the city with government troops trying to destroy other pockets of enemy resistance. The entire city was back under government control in the afternoon. Friendly troops continued their sweep operations against possible enemy remnants during the rest of the day and virtually controlled all of the city's strategic bases and thoroughfares.
On the second day of Tet, Jan 31, the enemy launched desperate assaults on the post office and the radio station. He was thrown back at both places.

A number of enemy troops who were lost or hidden in populated areas continued taking potshots at government troops. A determined sweep operation was conducted in all suspect areas with significant results. The city was back to normal a few day later except for the long curfew imposed on its civilian population. At night the enemy slammed mortar shells into the city in a campaign of harassment. The shelling continued for two weeks in succession.

The Tet offensive cost the enemy an estimated 500 killed, including 100 in the airfield perimeter areas, over 100 at the RF-PF Training Center and nearly 200 inside the city. 300 assorted weapons were seized and a number of others captured in action throughout the town.

The friendly side suffered 56 killed, 138 wounded and 80 missing. Forty three assorted weapons, mostly individual weapons, were destroyed by hostile fire during the fighting.

C. SIDELIGHTS OF THE FIGHTING

When the enemy troops invaded populated areas they sent local civilian residents out of their homes toward safer areas. People in unaffected areas closed their houses and stayed home. Many of them however, were curious enough to follow government agents and armored carriers on counterattack operations to watch the fighting. Generally the city people seemed disciplined and calm. Enemy agents led a crowd of about 1,000 people from the Thien An area into an anti-government march on the city. This march was swiftly dispersed on the outskirts.

The fighting caused comparatively high civilian casualties in the city; 61 were killed and 22 wounded. There were even higher casualties among people in district towns scattered throughout the area. District residents suffered 322 killed and 315 wounded. The province of Lang Ngai lost a total of 383 civilians killed and 337 wounded.

Civilian property damage throughout the province was generally moderate with 1,093 houses completely destroyed and 927 damaged. Included in this total were the 122 structures...
destroyed and 188 damaged inside Quang Ngai city. A large number of these were thatched or semi-concrete houses.

The local government provided 4,000 piastres to each of the victims' families for each person killed and 2,000 piastres for each person wounded. The victims also received other emergency relief supplies and building materials to help them rebuild their houses. The relief supplies included canned food, rice, milk, clothing etc. The building materials included cement and tin roofing. The province had been releasing large amounts of relief funds from its budget since 1965 when the enemy started increasing military pressures on it. There were 68 refugee centers throughout the province, Son Tinh district alone had 31 centers. The 68 centers sheltered a total of 66,749 refugees living in abject poverty and virtually jobless. Worse still a number of these centers became targets for enemy terror shellings. Of the total of 8,842 refugee houses in these 68 centers 1,232 were destroyed or collapsed by enemy mortar and rocket shells. In Duc Pho District 1,878 refugees were made homeless when their camp with 115 houses was burned down by terrorists.

Five refugee camps in Nghia Hanh district were likewise destroyed by enemy terrorists resulting in another 7,493 persons becoming homeless. From a combined total of 735 houses in the district, 442 were pulled down, collapsed or burned down. Some 394 people unable to wait for new shelters left the area for unknown destinations. Terrorists killed 39 of the Nghia Hanh refugees and abducted another 40 who were never heard of again and were thus presumed dead. The civilian casualties resulting from enemy shellings were never counted but were believed to be numerous. At stages of the shellings were almost daily occurrences.

The war profiteers, blackmarketeers and racketeers of various sorts added to these miseries of war suffered by these unfortunate Quang Ngai people. Four of these dishonest cheaters were arrested and lined up before a crowd along with eleven teenage captives. The war profiteers were paraded by the local administration in order to warn them against pursuing their path of crimes.

The enemy Tet truce violations and offensive obviously did extensive harm to the city and its people and defenders, but these violations also benefited them. These violations taught them the lesson of unity and determination, and motivated them into joining in a do or die struggle against the enemy and his cohorts.

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Popular resentment against Communism became greater and deeper. The provincial administration seized the opportunity to organize an anti-Communist popular movement called "Let's Rise Up And Destroy Communism". A mass meeting was held Feb 16 at the provincial administration headquarters. At this meeting leading civic, political and religious representatives worked out a crash program of self-defense, rehabilitation of the city and refugee relief.

A giant defense perimeter was set up around the city with, among other things, eight solid sandbagged and concrete bunkers. Several streets became restricted areas and the populace had to make long detours to go in and out of their homes on shopping, marketing and other business trips. Checkpoints were manned by part-time militiamen as well as full-time regular troops. Unused railroad equipment was also dismantled to build bunkers, pillboxes and watch-towers. The populace energetically engaged in a campaign of building sandbagged shelters against enemy shellings. This activity reached such a pitch that the blackmarket prices of sand and bags soared with each passing day. Travel restrictions were imposed on the people to the point where each citizen had to apply for a special pass to enable him to go from one district to another, even between those a few kilometers apart.

This campaign backfired in some cases, since it affected business and economic activities of local people adversely. Bureaucracy added to these and other difficulties. These problems were solved gradually as the situation improved and returned to complete normalcy.

The Quang Ngai offensive served to boost the morale of the people because the Communists conducted it in violation of the cease-fire and thereby suffered the highest number of casualties ever. Many young men volunteered for the military service. Conscription calls were answered by 100% for the first time in the war. Most if not all the local armed units also reached full strength for the first time. Replacements were easier to come by. Draft dodging was virtually nonexistent. The people took the enemy campaign of terror shellings and sneak attacks in stride and as a way of life. Fewer and fewer tears were shed over the dead. Anger and hatred filled the people's hearts for the enemy's wanton acts of terrorism. Stories told of teenage girls and old people volunteering for militia service. The line was infinitely drawn between friend and foe. Each and every citizen felt he had gotten the opportunity to do something to help his fellow.