

BATTLE FOR KONTUM

The Communist B-3 Front launched an all-out attack against Kontum during Tet 1968—and was soundly defeated.

BY ERIK B. VILLARD

The senior adviser for the 24th Special Tactical Zone, Colonel James P. Cahill, could only conclude that the Communist B-3 Front was planning a major operation. On January 5, 1968, the 4th Infantry Division had captured a Communist document titled "Urgent Combat Order Number One," which described plans for a large-scale attack on Pleiku at the end of the month. Five days later, a group of VC sappers carried out an unusually bold raid on the airfield at Kontum, destroying four helicopters and damaging 11 others. Finally, in midmonth, 4th Division Intelligence detected the 24th Regiment of the People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) moving southeast toward Kontum city. Given the upsurge in enemy activity, something big seemed to be brewing in the Central Highlands.

The American and South Vietnamese units in Kontum spent the second half of January improving their defensive positions. Colonel Cahill anticipated an attack from the north or west because a large river, the Dak Bla, protected the other approaches to Kontum. An informant in the Kontum area reported that the Communists planned to attack the city before or during the Tet holiday, and on January 27 aerial reconnaissance, using infrared detection, observed large enemy columns moving into position on the outskirts of Kontum. Cahill was ready. He placed his command on full alert and, on January 28, briefed the 4th Infantry Division's commander, Maj. Gen. Charles P. Stone, about the threat. Stone fully agreed and predicted that the main enemy attack would come against the airfield.

Right: The provincial capital of Kontum, seen here from the north, became the target of the Communist B-3 Front on January 29, 1968. **Opposite:** Quick action and hard fighting by both U.S. and ARVN troops helped defend the administrative area of Kontum from enemy attacks.



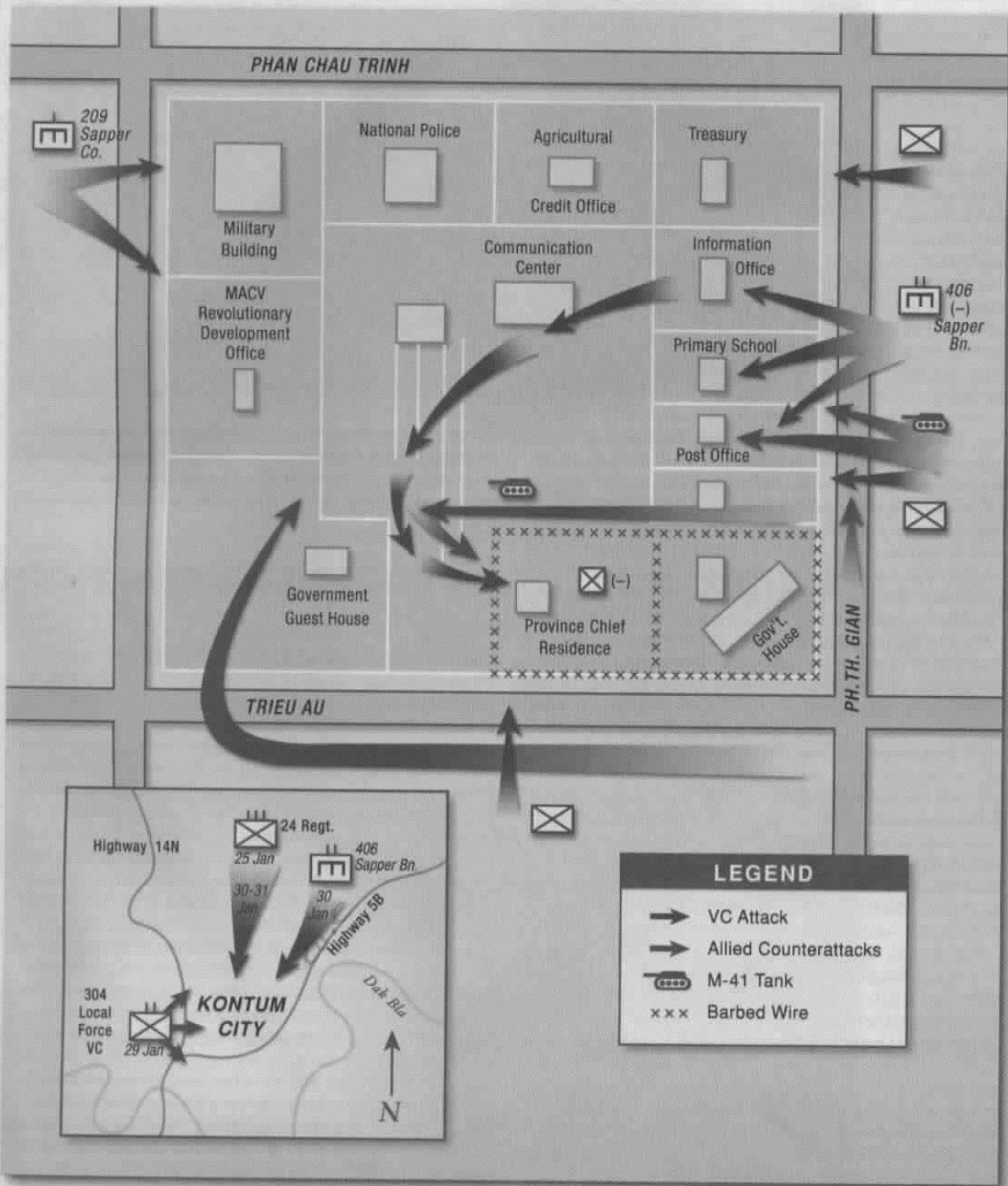
ALL PHOTOS: NATIONAL ARCHIVES VIA ERIK B. VILLARD

The Communists had every reason to seek the capture of Kontum. The town of 20,000 people served as the provincial capital and housed several military headquarters, including the South Vietnamese 24th Special Tactical Zone, the command responsible for the war in Kontum province along the border with Laos and Cambodia. Loss of the city would severely weaken the South Vietnamese government's control of the province and expose the heavily populated Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai provinces to the east to increasing Communist pressure.

Three military installations were situated on the northern edge of town. The Kontum airfield in the northeast quadrant housed the 57th Combat Assault Company; Troop A, 2nd Squadron, 1st Cavalry; Company B, 299th Combat Engineers; and a company of Montagnard irregulars. The American advisory compound in the northwest corner of the city contained the B-24 Detachment Special Forces Headquarters; the advisory headquarters attached to the 24th Special Tactical Zone; and Company C, 43rd Signal Battalion. In between the two American military encampments was the South Vietnamese 24th Special Tactical Zone headquarters, which included a battery of 105mm howitzers, and the 2nd Battalion, 42nd Regiment, ARVN.

To overwhelm those installations and their defenders, the commanders of the B-3 Front had some 3,000 North Vietnamese and VC soldiers at their disposal. When they launched their attack, the K-4 and K-5 battalions of the 24th PAVN Regiment would target the advisory compound and the South Vietnamese 24th Zone headquarters, supported by the U-1 Company of the 304th People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) Local Force Battalion. The 207th Company, 406th PAVN Sapper Battalion, would hit the government buildings in the center of town, and the 209th Company would go after the province chief's headquarters on the same block. The K-6 Battalion of the 24th PAVN Regiment; the 208th Company, 406th PAVN Sapper Battalion; and the C-2 Company, 304th PLAF Local Force Battalion, were to assault the airfield and associated facilities. An artillery unit armed with 120mm mortars and 122mm rockets—probably the K-32 Battalion of the 40th PAVN Artillery Regiment—would

NTUM



The 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. William P. Junk, moved in rapidly to help relieve the beleaguered city. At right, members of the 1-22 return enemy fire during the attack.



support the attack from well-camouflaged firing positions 10 kilometers to the northeast. VC sympathizers would have safe houses and firing positions ready within the city itself.

The Communists planned to attack every military and government facility in Kontum at the same time and expected the civilian population to rise up against the provincial government and the South Vietnamese military. The Communists wanted to destroy the government apparatus, establish a revolutionary council and declare the region a liberated zone. Consequently, they had no plan for withdrawal and no rallying points, and their troops carried only three days of rations. As to timing and specific objectives, only a few key leaders knew them prior to the assault, believing as they did that it was more important to preserve the element of surprise.

Taking advantage of the lax discipline that occurred when many South Vietnamese soldiers left their stations to visit family and friends during the Tet holiday, the Communists infiltrated Kontum late on the evening of January 29. Assisted by VC agents based in Kontum, the 304th PLAF Battalion and elements of the 24th PAVN Regiment—approximately 600 men—used the noise and confusion of Tet festivities to slip past police checkpoints and guard posts. The balance of the VC and North Vietnamese soldiers, 2,400 strong, waited on the northern outskirts of town.

The offensive began at 2:12 a.m., when approximately 200 North Vietnamese troops advanced on the airfield from the north and northeast. Despite their careful preparations, however, the Communist assault quickly bogged down. Thick layers of new wire, new minefields and more searchlights installed after the January 10 sapper raid hampered their advance. More important, the allies had augmented the 57th Assault Helicopter Company with a new 35-man security platoon. The unit's members spotted the North Vietnamese as they crept toward the base's perimeter, and their Hueys soon unleashed a barrage of 7.62mm bullets and 40mm grenades. The concentrated fire disrupted the attack and made it nearly im-

possible for the Communists to coordinate their movements. As the helicopters dropped flares to illuminate the battlefield, the North Vietnamese troops foundered on the wire, unable to get within 50 meters of the airfield. Minutes after the attack on the airfield began,

AN EERIE QUIET DESCENDED

Communist mortar and rocket fire fell on the advisory compound, the zone headquarters and the province chief's residence. Colonel Cahill, at the advisory compound, asked Pleiku for immediate support from Douglas AC-47s and more gunships.

At 2:30 a.m., North Vietnamese sappers and VC emerged from their hiding places downtown and attacked the province chief's compound from the west and south. Intending to deceive the platoon of Montagnards and their American advisers defending the compound, many of them wore Regional Force uniforms. The irregulars saw through the ruse, however, and to the surprise of the Communists fought back with skill and determination.

The province chief, Lt. Col. Nguyen Hop Doan, was also not deceived. A graduate of the U.S. Command and Staff College and a former chief of staff of the South Vietnamese Special Forces at Nha Trang, he was an experienced and effective officer who had been in command at Kontum since 1965. Recognizing that the "Regional Force" troops outside the compound were in fact the enemy because they lacked American-style helmets and carried nonregulation backpacks, he ran to the northwest corner of his courtyard and ordered one of his officers to fire an M-79 grenade launcher into a cluster of enemy troops hiding in a nearby trench. The M-79 rounds took out the entire group, killing what later turned out to be the local VC commander and the individuals who made up the enemy's shadow government in Kontum.

Although the loss of their commander represented a critical blow, the Communist troops concentrated their attack and occupied all the compound buildings except the province chief's residence, the adjacent province headquarters and the U.S. advisers' communication shack. The Americans and South Vietnamese controlled an area of only 250 square meters, an island in a sea of enemy soldiers.

During the fight at the province chief's compound, troops from the 24th PAVN Regiment and 304th PLAF Battalion assaulted the advisory compound and the zone headquarters, located a kilometer to northwest and north, respectively. At the advisory compound, the Communists supported their attack with mortar and machine-gun fire from the Prisoner Interrogation Center and Language Institute buildings, located only a few dozen meters to the northeast. They came within a few meters of the building perimeters before helicopter gunships, South Vietnamese artillery and small-arms fire turned them back. To Colonel Cahill's frustration, the South Vietnamese zone commander, a Colonel Luat, stayed in his home and did not take an active role in the fight. Luat even refused to come out when General Stone and the commander of MACV Forward, Lt. Gen. William B. Rossen, arrived by helicopter and were nearly killed by sniper fire trying to reach Luat's house.

A few hours before daybreak, the North Vietnamese tried to reinvigorate their assault on the north side of the airfield by launching a large-scale attack toward the runway. In response, the 1st Platoon, Troop A, 2nd Squadron, 1st Cavalry, flanked the attackers with four M-113 armored personnel carriers and two M-48 tanks, disrupting the assault. An eerie quiet descended over Kontum. Although the Communists controlled almost all of the city, the popular uprising they had counted on had failed to materialize. Instead, Kontum looked like a ghost town.

Bla bridge on the southern edge of Kontum where Highway 14 entered the city. Company B arrived at the airfield in the afternoon and then swept north, making sure that no Communist soldiers were within a kilometer of the base. Company A helicoptered to the bridge at 7 p.m., and Junk established a tactical command post there.

The colonel arrived just as the fighting in Kontum resumed. Only minutes earlier the 40th PAVN Artillery Regiment had launched a concentrated rocket and mortar barrage against the airfield while Communist troops in the city attacked from the south. The Communists north of the airfield did not join the assault, probably because Company B's sweep of the area earlier in the day had disrupted their preparations. The VC succeeded in penetrating the southern edge of the airfield, but gunships quickly drove them back.

Communist forces renewed their attack on the advisory compound and the zone headquarters just after midnight. Artillery and gunship fire killed many North Vietnamese and VC troops caught in the open. Despite terrible losses, the Communists briefly penetrated the east side of the advisory compound at 4:15 a.m. Fearing that the compound might be overrun, the advisory staff destroyed classified reports and informant files. In the end, however, the U.S. Air Force came to the rescue, making a series of low-altitude parachute drops to deliver badly needed ammunition to the compound. The South Vietnamese zone headquarters also repulsed the Communist attack, despite a 122mm rocket that turned most of their artillery dump into an enormous fireball. The fighting finally abated as daylight approached.

American and South Vietnamese reinforcements poured into Kontum on January 31. In the morning, a company of Montagnards from Special Forces Detachment A-242 at Dak Pek landed

OVER KONTUM. THE CITY LOOKED LIKE A GHOST TOWN.

The first American reinforcements reached Kontum at 9:30 a.m. on January 30. Task Force Delta, made up of the aero rifle platoons of Troops A and B, as well as Troop D of the 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry, helicoptered from Pleiku to the Kontum airfield, though they were delayed for nearly two hours by intense automatic-weapons fire from the northeast. The American force consolidated its position by 1 p.m., and began a sweep to the north of the airfield. As it did, Colonel Cahill requested more help from the 4th Infantry Division, headquartered at Pleiku, 30 kilometers to the south. The division ordered the 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry, commanded by Lt. Col. William P. Junk, to relieve the city. Junk and his reconnaissance and liaison team helicoptered into Kontum to confer with Colonels Cahill and Doan, and then flew back to organize his relief force, designated Task Force I-22.

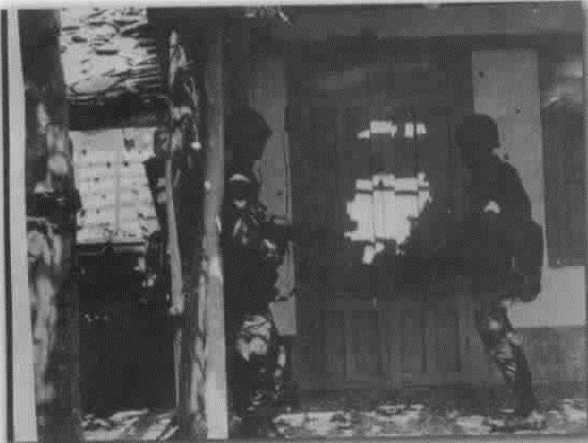
With Companies A and B of the 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry, at his immediate disposal, Colonel Junk decided that one unit should reinforce Task Force Delta north of the airfield, while the other secured the Dak

at the advisory compound to protect its perimeter. In the middle of the day, Company D, 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry, helicoptered to Kontum and eventually took up positions at the airfield. In the afternoon, Battery C, 4th Battalion, 42nd Artillery, arrived by helicopter and established a firebase just south of the Dak Bla bridge.



Communist soldiers captured in the attack are interrogated while the struggle for Kontum continues.

Two American soldiers prepare to enter a house in Kontum during a citywide search for pockets of Communist resistance.



Around dusk, nine M-48 tanks from Company C, 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, reached Kontum by way of Highway 14. The tanks broke into smaller teams and deployed to several vulnerable sections on the allied perimeters.

Late in the afternoon, Task Force Delta moved from the airfield to the advisory compound. The task force commander, Captain Anthony X. Hoyer, would later recall that apart from occasional AK-47 fire audible in the distance there were almost no signs of the enemy. Other allied units did find small pockets of VC and North Vietnamese, and records indicate that 65 Communists were killed that day.

As daylight faded, the Communists renewed their attack against the advisory compound. At 8:30 p.m. the North Vietnamese managed to knock out the camp's generator and extinguish the perim-

Some of the bloodiest fighting occurred during house-to-house battles. The Communists lost more than 90 soldiers before retreating from the western part of Kontum.



eter lights. For several hours, intense enemy fire prevented helicopters from bringing in more ammunition, but finally a Lockheed C-130 parachuted supplies into the compound and a few daring helicopter pilots delivered their payloads. The fight raged until dawn, finally tapering off into a sporadic exchange of small-arms and mortar fire.

By the morning of February 1, Colonel Junk and his staff had a reasonably good idea of the enemy's strength and dispositions. He knew that several VC and North Vietnamese battalions occupied the northern outskirts of Kontum. Many Communists, hundreds probably, were also still at large in the city. Junk asked division headquarters for more soldiers and received Company C, the only uncommitted rifle

company in the battalion.

The allies began their counterattack that day. Colonels Cahill and Junk instructed their troops to take great care because many structures contained innocent civilians. Company D, minus one

AS DAYLIGHT FADED

platoon acting as security for the airfield, swept the area east of the province chief's house and directed gunship and tank fire against Communist strongpoints. As the day went on, it was filled with bloody house-to-house fighting. Company B and Task Force Delta cleared the western part of Kontum and reopened Highway 14, per-

mitting supply convoys to travel once again between Pleiku and Dak To. The Communists resisted fiercely, losing 90 men before retreating from the western part of the city.

Company C reinforced the airfield at 1830 that evening. Half an hour later, the Communists initiated light ground probes against the airport's western perimeter. North Vietnamese soldiers also attacked the north side of the advisory compound, but the allied defenders drove them back. Shortly after midnight, the Communists halted their attacks but kept up a steady fire that lasted into the morning, using automatic weapons and mortars and firing several 122mm rockets.

→ At 9:30 a.m. on February 2, Junk ordered Company D to flush out the Communists hiding in the camp's Prisoner Interrogation Center and Language Institute northeast of the advisory compound. When the 1st Platoon moved into the center of the complex, however, the North Vietnamese caught them in a deadly ambush. As the headquarters



The VC and NVA supported their attack on the advisory compound with mortar and machine-gun fire from some of these buildings of the Prisoner Interrogation Center and Language Institute.

his command. The North Vietnamese, however, had no intention of leaving the initiative to the Americans. Well aware that Junk would move to cut off their escape route, they took up positions on Hill 684, some five kilometers to the northeast of the town. Oc-

THE COMMUNISTS RENEWED THEIR ATTACK.

and 2nd Platoon tried to extricate the pinned-down men, several of them wounded, Junk ordered Company C to move from the southern part of the city to help.

The momentum of the battle shifted shortly after noon, when Company C reached the advisory compound. Accompanied by two M-48 tanks and an armored personnel carrier from Troop A, 2nd Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, the force gave Company D time to pull back and regroup by taking the Language Institute under fire. The company would later claim it had killed 47 of the enemy in the attack.

The Communists began to show signs of panic. Fearing they would be trapped, about 100 North Vietnamese soldiers hiding in the Prisoner Interrogation Center fled, heading west across an open field. Companies C and D plus the three armored vehicles opened fire, killing most of them.

Gunship crews observed at least a company of VC to the north running away. An allied victory became all but inevitable when Companies B and D, 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, helicoptered from Dak To to positions north of the airfield. That evening, for the first time since January 29, the city was quiet.

By then, the Communists had realized that their chance to take Kontum was gone. On February 3, as a result, any who were still in the city dispersed into small groups for withdrawal. Some changed into civilian clothing to avoid capture. By the next day, only a few die-hard snipers remained in Kontum. Confident that the city was secure, Junk returned Companies B and D to Dak To early in the evening.

Colonel Junk knew that the North Vietnamese troops were regrouping somewhere to the north. He hoped to locate and trap them before they slipped away into the Highlands. The colonel decided to pursue the 24th PAVN Regiment with all the forces still under

cupping bunkers and trenches that had been used as staging points for their original attack, they lay in wait for whatever their opponents had to offer.

On February 5, Junk welcomed the arrival of Battery B, 5th Battalion, 16th Artillery, armed with 155mm howitzers, to the firebase at the Dak Bla bridge. He now had at his disposal two artillery batteries, one tank battalion, one armored cavalry squadron and five infantry battalions. Believing that the North Vietnamese were somewhere to the northeast, he ordered Company C to locate the Communist positions.

At 1:30 p.m., Company C encountered an enemy force about 1,500 meters south of Hill 684. Suspecting that he had located at least part of the 24th PAVN Regiment, Junk reinforced Company C with Company A and four M-48 tanks and began to call in artillery, airstrikes and gunships. The fighting lasted into the evening. By the time the North Vietnamese broke contact, Company C had suffered six men killed and 12 wounded, and Company A lost one killed and three wounded. Enemy casualties were unknown. The two U.S. units pulled back to Kontum for the night.

Colonel Junk and his staff decided to assault Hill 684 at first light on February 6. Their plan was simple. In effect, two rifle companies would attack abreast of one another, with Company A on the left and Company B on the right. The objective points would be on adjacent peaks, with Company A storming Hill 684 and Company B taking Hill 721, one kilometer to the east. After reaching its goal, Bravo Company would perform a flanking maneuver to the left in support of Alpha Company, in an attempt to trap any enemy troops that remained on top of Hill 684. Company C would act as a reserve and exploitation force, while Company C, 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, would patrol a broad, flat area to the south of Hill 684 and provide supporting fire.

Continued on page 64



USMC Gear

Bumper Stickers
T-shirts Posters Covers
Golf Shirts Books Music
Decals Videos Knives Bags
and a lot more

Free Catalog
Toll Free 866-776-2607

Sgt. Gril
PO Box 60119VN
Oklahoma City, OK 73146
Or check us out on the Net
Order online:
<http://www.grunt.com>
email:info@grunt.com



VIETNAM TOURS III Corps • 25th Division

October 10-18, 2003

Saigon • Cu Chi • Dau Tieng • Ho Bo Woods • Trang Bang
Go Da Ha • Tay Ninh • Katum • 173rd's Drop Zone & More!

Central Highlands • 4th Division

October 14-24, 2003

Saigon • Pleiku • Dragon Mountain • Kontum • Dak To • Ben Het
Mang Yang Pass & An Khe Pass • Qui Nhon • Nha Trang

Extensions to Angkor Wat, Hong Kong, Taipei & Bangkok
Custom tours to your service areas. Individuals or groups!

Airfare • Hotels • Ground transport & more!

Send for free brochure today!

MilSpec Tours

Vietnam Veteran Owned and Operated

Dept. V, Post Office Box 340 • Flourtown, PA 19031
1-215-248-2572 Email: Gomilspec@aol.com

HAT PINS • MEDALS •

BUCKLES • PATCHES



FREE COLOR CATALOG

- 2500+ Military Designs
- Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines
- **Call now! Toll-free!**
1-888-223-1159
- Custom pins & patches available.
Dealer inquiries welcome.

HONORS

by Hoover's Mfg., Co.

P.O. Box 547VN, Peru, IL 61354
Fax: 1-815-223-1499

BALL CAPS

Specialists in

VIETNAM TRAVEL

For Veterans: HQs, AOs, LZs, FSBs
Group Tours or Custom Travel
Where, when and what you want

*Celebrating 10 years as a Pioneer and
Leader in Vietnam Travel*

NINE DRAGONS TRAVEL & TOURS

1-800-909-9050

tours@nine-dragons.com

www.nine-dragons.com

P.O. Box 24105

Indianapolis, IN 46224-0105



Kontum

FROM PAGE 33

The attack began at 7:30 a.m. on February 6, following airstrikes and a preparatory artillery barrage. At first, the Americans met little opposition. At 10:35 a.m., however, Company A ran into a hail of small-arms fire, mortar rounds and B-40 rockets coming from well-protected, concealed bunkers on Hill 684. In response, Junk ordered Bravo Company to move west from Hill 721 and join the battle. Linking up with the right flank of Company A, the unit threw its weight against the North Vietnamese, but intense fire once more stopped the assault. When the commander of Company A went down with an incapacitating wound, Junk ordered both companies to pull back while airstrikes and artillery bombarded the enemy position. The Americans resumed the attack at 1:18 p.m., but pulled back 15 minutes later after taking more casualties.

As the fight on Hill 684 grew more intense, the 4th Infantry Division's commander, Maj. Gen. William R. Peers, decided to commit more men to the battle. That afternoon, Company A, 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry, helicoptered to Kontum and moved to a position one kilometer east of the hill without encountering opposition. The rest of the day passed without significant contact. In all, the 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry, had suffered four killed, 17 wounded and one missing, while claiming 11 North Vietnamese killed.

During the following night, Colonel Junk's staff planned a second assault. The next morning, February 7, artillery and strike aircraft pounded Hill 684. When the assault began, Companies A and B, as well as Company A, 1-12, advanced abreast up the hill. Company D, supported by M-48 tanks, moved in a wide flanking maneuver to the west of the hill and Company C moved to the east in order to block the enemy's lines of escape, but most of the Communists had slipped away during the night. During that day, the Americans suffered one killed and four wounded, and claimed four enemy killed.

On the afternoon on February 9, Company A, 1-12, reached the top of Hill 684 and found it deserted. The next morning, the company surprised a group of North Vietnamese soldiers coming down a trail and

killed at least seven, but otherwise February 10 passed with only a few fleeting glimpses of the enemy. The 24th PAVN Regiment finally broke contact on February 12 and disappeared into the remote forests of the Central Highlands.

The Communist offensive in Kontum had been an expensive failure. From January 30 to February 12, allied forces claimed 1,189 VC and North Vietnamese killed. U.S. Intelligence would later estimate that the three enemy units involved suffered at least 50 percent casualties. The 24th Regiment remained capable of offensive action, but in mid-April pulled back to Cambodia to refit and replace its losses. The heavily battered 304th Battalion stayed in the area north of Kontum but avoided contact for the remainder of the year. The 406th PAVN Sapper Battalion also remained in Kontum province, but since perhaps as many as 80 percent of its members had perished during the Tet Offensive, it was combat ineffective for the rest of the year.

By contrast, the allied units were barely touched: The Americans suffered 24 killed and about 200 wounded in the defense of Kontum city and the pursuit afterward. The South Vietnamese killed in action totaled 46 regulars, 12 irregulars, six National Police-men and two New Life agents. Another 217 South Vietnamese, including civilians, had been wounded in the battle.

For his poor performance, Colonel Luat was relieved of his command, although he ended up becoming inspector general for II Corps. The fighting destroyed 10 percent of the city and left 6,870 people homeless. In subsequent months the Communists harassed Kontum with rocket and mortar fire, but it was not until the 1972 Easter Offensive that the B-3 Front felt strong enough to risk another assault on the city. ☆

Erik B. Villard is a staff historian at the U.S. Army's Center of Military History. For further reading, see: Tet! The Turning Point in the Vietnam War, by Don Oberdorfer; and The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War, by James J. Wirtz.



To read more about Tet 1968, go to TheHistoryNet.com at militaryhistory.about.com/vietnam and see "Desperate Hours During Tet: Inside MACV," by James J. Carafano and Walter T. Kerwin, which will appear the week of January 13, 2003.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT the major campaigns, battles and military operations of the Vietnam War, go to militaryhistory.about.com/library/bvietnambattles.htm