

# **A TROOP 2-1 Armored Cavalry**

## **TET 1968 - A HARD INTRODUCTION TO WAR**

COL Colin "Mac" McArthur, USA (Ret)

### **PREFACE**

In late 2007, the editor of the local Beaufort Gazette, Beaufort, SC asked if I would be interested in authoring an article on my Vietnam experience during Tet 1968. After consideration, I agreed and my article published on January 30, the 40th anniversary of the start of the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese first major attempt to cut South Vietnam in half.

It is now more than 54 years since that fateful time. 1968 saw the largest loss of US life in the almost 10 years of major US combat involvement in Vietnam. The number of US casualties led to the mainstream loss of national will to continue supporting a conflict increasingly regarded as a civil war and signaled the start of US eventual withdrawal from Southeast Asia.

Late last year, after receiving a copy of the fall 2021 edition of the 2d Squadron, 1st (Armored) Cavalry Associations "Blackhawk Bulletin" announcing the May 2022 Association bi-annual reunion in Columbus, Georgia, I decided I would attend. This was an event I had been reluctant to attend in the past. I reviewed the article I penned in 2008 and that opened Pandora's box for me. I realized the views expressed in the article, written about a difficult four days in my memory and perspective, were not necessarily those of all the soldiers of A Troop many who were in the thick of the battle. In short, my article was incomplete. Thus, I embarked to track down as many troopers as possible who were in A Troop during Tet and asked them to share their memories that would hopefully more accurately report of our fight from 30 January thru 2 February 1968. Once complete, I plan to provide it to all who have contributed, and to others who are interested.

I understand this narrative may be incomplete in that I have talked to only a small percentage of those of us who were there and that many of our comrades have passed on to Fiddlers Green. I also recognize there will be those who perceived the battle unfolded differently and may disagree with my subjective beliefs and/or comments and others who may not have contributed for personal reasons. Finally, we are looking



back 54 years and memories are like photos; they fade with time. One who has written extensively about major Vietnam battles told me there comes a time when the research must stop, and the writing must begin. Furthermore, I understand learned scholars write history, while those who live it author stories. This is our story.

### **Background**

In 1966 and 1967, as the war in Vietnam was rapidly escalating, numerous Army installations received recruits, most draftees, to provide Basic Combat Training (BCT) and follow on with Advanced Individual Training (AIT). Ft. Hood, TX, home to the First and Second Armored Divisions, was one of the installations selected, knowing both divisions cavalry squadrons were going to Vietnam in the fall of 1967. A major advantage was that the squadrons' cadre spent time training soldiers for months who would remain together and enter Vietnam as a unit well known to each other. While recruits came from all over the US, a significant percentage in this group were draftees from upstate New York further enhancing overall unit cohesiveness.

On or about 1 August, both squadrons rail-loaded their vehicles from Ft. Hood to Port Arthur, Texas. There the vehicles loaded on the *SS Louise Lykes* (Military Sea Transportation Service-MSTS) charter ship for transit via the Panama Canal to Da Nang and Qui Nhon, South Vietnam. 1LT Ronay, the squadron support platoon leader (later the A Troop 3d platoon leader), and an escort squad went with the shipment on the voyage. Days later, the squadron traveled to Oakland, CA, loaded on the USNS *General Walker* and sailed to Vietnam. 1LT Ronay remembers arriving in Qui Nhon a week or so before the *General Walker* arrived. After a two day stop in Okinawa, a one-day stop in Da Nang to offload the 1st Squadron, 2d Squadron arrived in Qui Nhon, received its equipment and after a brief period, road marched west on Hwy 19, arrived at Camp Enari base camp outside Pleiku, and attached to the 4th Infantry Division.

The divisional Armored Cavalry Squadron of the time was a powerful combat unit. Designed as the reconnaissance and security force for an armored or mechanized division in the European theater, its role in Vietnam would be primarily securing major highways and protecting convoys vital to supplying units in the field. The 2-1 Squadron consisted of three armored cavalry troops, A, B & C, and one Air Cavalry Troop D. However, D Troop did not arrive in Vietnam until mid-1968.

A, B & C Troop each had its headquarters and three-line platoons of 10 vehicles. Each platoon consisted of the platoon leader's Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicle (ACAV), a scout section of four ACAVs, a three M48-A3 tank section led by the platoon sergeant, a 9-man infantry track (ACAV) and a M125 mortar track. The ACAVs were M113A1 personnel carriers (PCs) armed with a 50-cal machinegun and two M60 machineguns, all

with large gun shields (O), and a 40mm hand-held grenade launcher. The mortar track fielded the 50-cal machinegun, two M60 machine-guns without gun shields, and an 81mm mortar, believed to be more effective in the close-range Vietnam environment than the 4.2-inch mortar that was then standard. The Troop commanders all had an ACAV.



Shortly, the Squadron received a widely spread road security mission and set up its HQ, Blackhawk Firebase (FB), on Hwy 19 approximately 20 miles east of Pleiku. Its mission was to secure Hwy 19



from just west of An Khe, base camp of the 1st Cavalry (Airmobile) Division, to Pleiku, approximately 52 miles (90 km) and approximately 21 miles (30km) of Hwy 14 from Kontum to Dak To, HQ of the 1st Brigade 4th Infantry Division. The ARVN 3d Armored Cavalry Squadron secured Hwy 14 between Pleiku and Kontum. In addition to conducting morning minesweeper and protecting the daily convoy that started at the port at Qui Nhon, went through An Khe to Pleiku and Dak To and back, the three troops aided local regional Viet-







name forces protecting multiple bridges at night.

Initially, C Troop, assigned to the Hwy 14 mission, set up its troop HQ in an old French cantonment area on the NE corner of Kontum, just north of the small city airfield.

From entry into Vietnam in early September 1967 thru the end of the year, the squadron saw limited action reacting to numerous hit and run enemy ambushes aimed at destroying convoy vehicles along Hwy 19 and 14. Enemy mines were a continuous problem as well as frequent interdiction of



an oil pipeline along the south side of Hwy 19. Considerations of the threat and terrain required that the troop in Kontum physically escort convoys on Hwy 14 north of Kontum, while the troops along Hwy 19 occupied strong points (SPs) on critical spots after the early morning minesweep.

In late fall 1967, things changed significantly north of Pleiku in Kontum Province. Between 3 November and 23 November, major engagements of the Vietnam war raged in the hills southwest of Dak To between the North Vietnamese Army (NVA)

and the 4th Infantry Division and its attached elements of the 503rd Infantry Regiment of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. During this period, four hundred Americans were killed and 1,500 wounded.

Although the fighting southwest of Dak To succeeded in allowing the NVA to draw significant numbers of US and ARVN forces out of cities, three of the weakened NVA regiments could not take part in the forthcoming Tet Offensive. However, major NVA forces remained in Kontum Province preparing for Tet, a planned coordinated attack on major South Vietnamese cities on 31 January, the lunar new year.



In early January 1968, I arrived in Vietnam as a recently promoted Captain and spent my first night at Long Binh, between Saigon and Binh Hoa airbase. The following morning my brother-in-law, a SP4 college graduate drafted upon graduation and assigned in Long Binh, told me I was on orders to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. However, given the recent fighting and US losses up north in II Corp, my orders changed to the 2d Squadron 1st Armored Cavalry Regiment (Blackhawks) in Pleiku Province, approximately 300 miles north. Promptly the next day, awakened early by a young SGT and told to grab my gear, I soon boarded an Army C-7A Caribou along with another newly promoted armor Captain. We landed in Pleiku at Camp Enari and joined 2-1 Cav.

### To Kontum

For the first few days, I in-processed at the 2-1 rear area and then sent to the Blackhawk Firebase on Hwy 19. I learned A & C Troop were securing

Hwy 19, B Troop was in Kontum, and A troop would soon replace B Troop and its Highway 14 mission. Pending assignment, I worked in the S3 (Operations) shop before the Squadron Commander, LTC Charles Graham, assigned me as the A Troop Executive Officer (XO). The commander wanted the current A Troop XO, 1LT Marshall Wallach, as his new Intelligence staff officer (S2). A day or two later a Huey flew me north to the A Troop FB in Kontum. As I jumped off, 1LT Marshall Wallach, my predecessor, jumped on and flew back to Blackhawk FB. This was early in the last week of January. There was no overlap.

I learned that A troop's 2d Platoon was under the operational control (OPCON) of the 1st Cavalry Division working out of FB Schueller between An Khe and the Mang Yang Pass. Thus, the troop had only two of its three platoons, stretching us thin. The Kontum airfield, abandoned when C Troop initially arrived in September, was now home to the 57th Assault Helicopter Company and elements of their parent unit, 52d Aviation Battalion. Approximately 100 meters separated their maintenance area and our southern perimeter. A short distance further south were the helicopter revetments and a short 3600 ft E-W runway. North of our perimeter was a US combat engineer company.

### **Storm Clouds**

As I started this project, I contacted a college classmate who was in Kontum during Tet, flying a Huey UH-1C gunship of the 57th Assault Helicopter Company. Knowing I wanted to gather individual recollections of Tet in Kontum, he led me to retired LTG Hugh Smith who was then a CPT commanding the 57th Assault Helicopter Company Maintenance Platoon. He supplied an astonishing, detailed after-action report of a main force VC sapper attack on the airfield on 10 January. Launched through the 173d Airborne Brigade trains area adjacent east of the airfield, the attack killed 6 Americans, wounded 18, and destroyed or heavily damaged 15 helicopters. The sapper breach of the airfield perimeter occurred approximately 100 meters south of the 2-1 Cav B Troop perimeter. While not the focus of this report, I talked to a couple of B Troop folks involved in that

engagement. In retrospect, it is probable the VC attack was also a forceful reconnaissance for the main NVA Tet offensive in Kontum, as well as designed to destroy as many of the 57th helicopters as possible, particularly the feared UH-1C "Charlie" model gunships.

**(See included addendum #1 with attack details)**



A week or so before I arrived, A Troop filtered into Kontum between 13-15 January, replacing B Troop. Designated OPCON to 1st Brigade 4th Infantry Division in Dak To, A Troop's mission was to occupy daylight strong points (SPs) along Hwy 14N between Pleiku and Kontum and physically escort convoys on Hwy 14 between Kontum and Dak To. SPs usually consisted of 3-4 tracks placed at strategic points along the route. Nightly, platoons occupied SPs on selected bridges supporting local Regional Force/Popular Force soldiers and augmented the defense of the Troop HQ perimeter in Kontum. A Troop had no responsibility to provide security for the airfield. When escorting, our tracks integrated with the convoys to aid MPs as they shepherded the logistical convoys in the run from Qui Nhon in their vulnerable M151 jeeps armed with only a floor mounted 50 cal machinegun that tended to rip itself out of its mounting.

The daily intelligence summaries (INSUMs) at higher levels had been warning of potential enemy attacks tied to the Tet Lunar New Year celebrations. However, A troop received no specific warnings from either 2d Squadron or 1st Bde 4th ID. The senior MACV advisor to the Kontum Province Chief provided the A Troop commander, CPT Ron West, with information on what we could expect for local New Year celebrations. However, he cautioned "They always try something." Given the



earlier 10 January attack on the airfield and a recent attack on the 69th Armor north of Kontum, our troop took seriously any possible enemy threat to its position or the mission protecting Hwy 14, the sole ground supply line to the three infantry battalions, artillery battalion, and logistical support of the 1st Brigade in Dak To.

The warnings resulted in major precautions strengthening the Troop HQ perimeter by constructing and reinforcing sandbagged revetments for all Troop HQ vehicles, adding more rows of tri-



CPT Ron West



ple concertina wire, placing Claymore mines in front of each vehicle revetment, and repositioning some single strand barbed wire to channelize an enemy into an old, but still active, French laid minefield. As TET approached, we required 50% security at night on each vehicle. On the night of 29-30 January, CPT West had positioned an SP on the critical Hwy 14N bridge entering Kontum, as well as an SP further south in an ambush site. While intelligence often warned of attacks that never materialized, and taken lightly by many, A Troop was well prepared.

The A Troop (-2d Plt) deployment on the night of

29-30 January was as follows:

#### 1st Plt

3 ACAVs 12, 18 & 11 (?) southwest end Kontum Bridge Hwy 14

1 ACAV 10 (1Lt Plesko) & 11(?), tank 17 & Mortar Track 19 on Hwy 14 SP 4 km south of town

#### 3d Plt

2 Tank, 1 Tank Bridge 12 Hwy 14 N of Kontum

2 ACAVs Bridge 18 Hwy 14 N of Kontum

1 ACAV, 2 Tanks, 1 Mortar Track Bridge 22 north of Kontum

#### HQ Perimeter

ACAVs 13 & 14 outside perimeter between Motor pool & airfield perimeter

ACAVs A6, 80, 71, 31 (in for maint), 2 Tanks (15 & 16 in for Maint.), Medic and Commo track

Planned that if there was an enemy attack on any of the A Troop SP positions or the Troop HQ, 1st Platoon would be the reaction force.

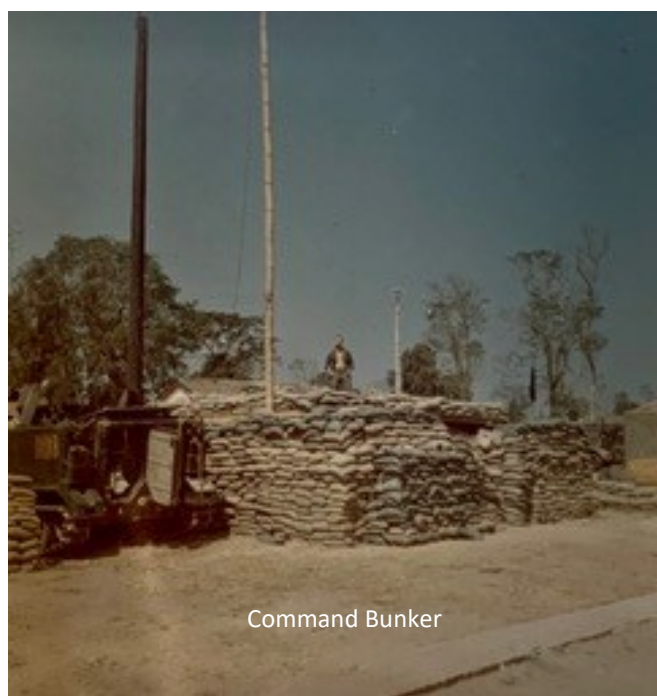
#### Tet - 30 January - 5 February

CPT West and I bonded well. Paying attention to the increased threat, CPT West charged me to monitor the radios at night. My primary mission was keeping situational awareness and making random, frequent communication checks with each vehicle in both platoons south and north of Kontum, and all vehicles protecting our HQ perimeter. Two ACAV's, A13 and A14, were in position outside the wire toward the NE corner of the airfield perimeter, the vulnerable approach the enemy had used to breach the airfield's wire on 10 January. A communication specialist and I were the only two in the command (commo) bunker. My random net radio calls were to ensure staffing in every vehicle was with two alert soldiers on watch, prepared to engage any attack on their position and waking those asleep.

At approximately 0130, on the 30th, not getting a response from one vehicle on the perimeter, I headed out into the blackness, climbed onto the rear deck of a tank, and awoke a sleeping soldier. I tapped him on his helmet; he awakened with a start. Sleeping on guard is a serious offense. However, these troops had been up all day in blistering heat and choking dust. I lectured him for a minute

or two ensuring he was fully awake, then moved on mounting every one of the remaining vehicles and talking briefly to everyone on guard making sure all were awake and alert. I made it clear that vigilance was critical particularly for the next few days and if they could not stay awake to get others of their crew to replace them. Literally seconds after returning to the commo bunker all hell broke loose. It was 0210, 30 January, one day **before** Tet.

A recoilless rifle round hit the main building in our perimeter, which woke the CO and 1st Sgt, and we came under heavy fire from machineguns, mortars, and recoilless rifles. The CO and 1SG joined us in the command bunker. Mortars hit in and around our perimeter wounding a couple troops sleeping on cots outside their vehicles but inside their revetment. I assisted carrying one of the wounded to an ACAV for transport to the airfield aid station. Initially there was no ground attack, but we expected it. Our ACAVs and two



tanks peppered the cleared, lightly vegetated area two hundred meters forward of our well-prepared perimeter. CPT West ordered 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon back to reinforce the perimeter.

Outside the wire A13 and A14 were receiving small arms fire, hand grenades, and B-40 Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) fire. One grenade hit the

deck of A14 wounding gunner SP4 Karl Young. As 14 headed back to get Young to the aid station a B-40 hit A13 seriously wounding the driver SP4 Richard Rial and the vehicle commander, SSG Martin. Although gravely wounded, Rial started the track and turned back toward the A Troop perimeter before losing consciousness (Rial died from his wound). SSG Martin, wounded in the legs, pulled Rial from the driver's compartment and headed the vehicle back toward the perimeter. While moving, automatic weapons fire hit A14 wounding SP4 Kirch. This action continued for 30-45 minutes at close range. 13 and 14 finally returned to the perimeter. SSG Martin said if Rial, although gravely wounded, had not started the track, and headed back to the perimeter, the entire crew would have died.

The attack on our perimeter and that of the 57th Assault Helicopter Company was a part of the first phase of the attack on Kontum City by both the 24th NVA Regiment and VC Main Force 100. The enemy wanted to pin us down and again penetrate the 57th as it had on 10 January, destroying as many aircraft as possible early in the fight. They focused their indirect fire on us hoping to immobilize our combat vehicles in place meanwhile breaching the defenses of the 57th. Placement of our two ACAVs outside our wire between our perimeter and that of the 57th, our massive firepower and aggressive reaction along with the airfields recent security improvements precluded any repeat penetration of the 57th perimeter.

The indirect enemy fire had slowed by approximately 0315 about the same time 1st platoon's remaining two sections arrived with the vehicles supporting those in prepared defensive positions. Shortly, A13 called 1LT Plesko and reported Rial wounded. Plesko's ACAV moved to A13 track, pulled the unresponsive soldier into his track, and raced him to the airfield aid station. Unfortunately, he had passed. Richard Rial was the only trooper killed during the night.

1LT Plesko returned five to ten minutes later, as a ground attack launched at our perimeter. Enemy soldiers were trying to work their way through the wire while under fire by all perimeter vehicles. CPT West ordered Plesko to attack and destroy

the attacking force. Plesko aligned six vehicles, a tank, three ACAVs and a trail tank in an echelon left formation. ACAV 18 was supposed to be the sixth track but the TC, SSG Curry reported a mortar round damaged the suspension. As they approached the gate, 1Lt Plesko had the lead tank fire lethal canister rounds to clear the ground to the right. They then went ahead through the perimeter gate, Plesko noting the enemy was already near our wire. Not wanting any enemy left to his rear as they moved forward, he ran them down while reporting the estimated attacking force as "at least company size." As the platoon moved forward, laying down suppressive fire, a volley of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) struck four of 1LT Plesko's five tracks. Tanks A15 (PSG Shoemaker) and tank A17 (SSG Plosay) were both hit without major damage. Two ACAVs received B-40 RPG hits: Plesko's A10 took a round broadside wounding him and SP4 John Collins, and possibly SP4 Gordon Van Slyke, and PFC Richard Green. Plesko



was momentarily unconscious. The second ACAV hit had four wounded.

#### **(See included addendum #2 with attack details)**

At this time 3d platoon, north of Kontum on Hwy 14, received orders back to our perimeter as it appeared we could be overrun despite the heroic actions of 1st platoon.

#### **1LT Plesko recounts his story:**

"When I came to, I could see and feel the wound

in my right hand. Two of my other three crew members were working on the third who had a serious leg wound." It was time for 1LT Plesko to withdraw. "The crew from the other disabled ACAV squeezed into the third. That included another crew member who had a serious leg wound. My crew was going to evacuate on the back of one of the tanks. Since the tank is high and has no protection for anyone on the rear deck, I was concerned for their safety as they struggled to get our seriously wounded member in place."

Seeing the vulnerability of his crew, Plesko went to one of the M60 machineguns on his ACAV and laid down suppressive fire as best he could with a gravely wounded hand. Once the crew was aboard the tank, it backed over allowing Plesko to jump on.

#### **Again, 1LT Plesko's words:**

"The other vehicles began to back into the compound. The tank I was on was last. As we were backing out, I realized the tank commander, SSG Plosay, was wounded while trying to aid my crew onto the back of the tank. He was shot through his lungs and was laying on the fender of the tank. Unfortunately, as the tank abruptly changed direction to align itself with the entrance to the compound, he rolled off. I did not find this out until we finished pulling back into the perimeter and dismounted. My best NCO, SSG Hammock, and my two remaining crew members were discussing how to retrieve the wounded tank commander as I approached them. I told them I would go out for him as I was already dinged up too much to do other tasks and they were still combat effective. I did not want to risk them."

Plesko went out to retrieve his wounded tank commander. Finding SSG Plosay too heavy to lift and unable to talk, he persuaded him to rise, and they crouch-walked back into the perimeter. All the wounded except Plesko loaded in an ACAV. Because it was full, Plesko told them to take the short distance to the airfield aid station while he jogged along behind the vehicle.

Plesko's platoon, including the two vehicles initially outside the perimeter, deserve credit for breaking up the major ground assault on our perimeter

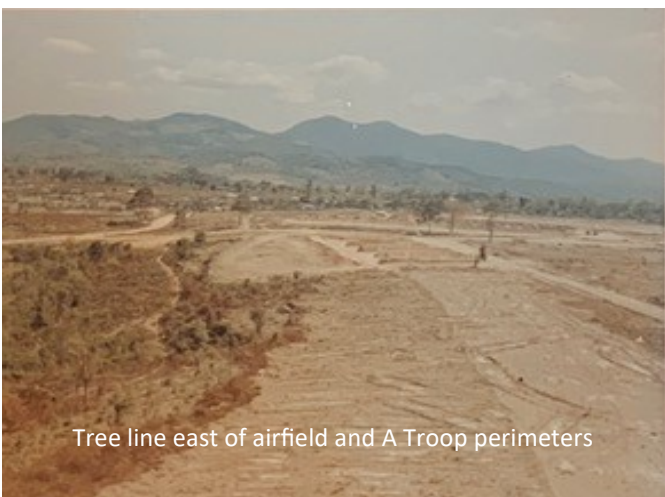


and that of the airfield. He and his wounded were air evacuated to Plieku's 71st Evacuation Hospital.

While all this was happening, the first section of 1LT Ronay's 3d platoon was on the move and ambushed as it approached Kontum. SSG Ed Collins, Scout Section Leader and another in his crew received severe wounds. All three of 1Lt Ronay's sections merged and continued to Kontum to join the perimeter fight, after delayed by SSG Ed Collins medevac'd by chopper from the 57<sup>th</sup> to the 71<sup>st</sup> Evacuation hospital.

The enemy ground assault on our perimeter had failed and action slowed considerably. However, it was now clear that the NVA had attacked on multiple fronts and infiltrated Kontum City. The sounds of contact were clear and the fight for Kontum was far from over. Our troop had fired thousands of 50 Cal and M60 MG rounds during the attack, and we needed to replace the 90 mm canister rounds fired by our tanks. We called Squadron for an emergency resupply.

Chaos of the early morning action tapered off at daylight and a quietness prevailed in the perimeter. The 1st task was clearly to prepare for a second NVA attack, account for all personnel, reposition vehicles, and redistribute ammunition. There appeared to be a hundred or more enemy bodies outside our perimeter and that of the airfield in



the approximately 200 meters between our perimeter and the scrub tree line where the land sloped down to the Dak Bla River. While there was a need to attain an accurate body count, retrieve enemy weapons and munitions and seek any rele-

vant information off enemy KIAs, our troops did not receive orders to do so.

At approximately 0900, CPT Hugh Smith, CO of the 57th Maint. Platoon, along with his 1SG Whitley, led a group of soldiers from the airfield through their perimeter to conduct a body count. They initially saw about 40 bodies and body parts and were following bloody trails toward the tree line when some A Troop soldiers joined the search. As they neared the tree line, CPT Smith's group saw freshly piled dirt in front of them. Fearing an enemy stay-behind force, CPT Smith ordered all troops to stop forward movement. Two of our soldiers, believed to be Glen Brust and Paul Gerlach, may not have heard the command, and continued eight to ten meters forward when the NVA threw two grenades and opened fire killing both. Heavy enemy machine-gun fire erupted, pinning down CPT Smith and his troops and A Troop soldiers who had also roamed forward of the perimeter. Also killed at this time were Bob Forkl, Louis Grove, and Dennis Kouhns. CPT Smith's group, pinned down, fired into the tree line while 1SG Whitley, arose and raced to the airfield to get help. He received two rounds through the fleshy part of his arm but succeeded in alerting a gunship to launch. Between 10:00-11:00 the gunship attacked the wood line, south to north, firing a salvo of rockets exactly where needed. The explosions raised great clouds of dust and debris and allowed those pinned down to get back to their respective perimeters.

Soon after, somewhere between 1100 & 1200, PSG Shelton (one of our finest, later killed on 6 March), led a tank and two ACAVs forward ensuring there were no remnants of any NVA stay behind force. After counting 20 enemy bodies left in the wood line, believed killed by their leaders as they withdrew, he recovered our five killed earlier.

In early afternoon, a mounted sweep of the area returned with 3 US carbines, 2 Chicom rifles, 3 RPG launchers, 1 light machine-gun, 1 Chicom sub-machine gun, 5 Bangalore torpedoes, 18 rounds 60mm mortars, 29 rounds 57mm recoilless ads, multiple hand grenades and 9 anti-personnel mines as well as numerous items of field equipment, clothing, and food. One captured NVA POW



was evacuated to the MACV HQ for interrogation. The appearance and equipment of the young NVA soldier gave evidence that he had only recently arrived from the north. Sweep elements counted 86 bodies within 200 meters of the perimeter.

Earlier on the 30th, the 4th Inf Div. assigned 1/22 Infantry the mission of clearing Kontum. Deployment began slowly as the unit, recently pulled from the field, was to rest and refit. Late on the 30th, the 1/22 CO, LTC William Junk, received command of all 4th ID forces in the Kontum area. Over the next three days, our tracks primarily, from the 3d platoon, aided 1/22 where a 3d platoon tank obliterated a "pink church steeple" used as a NVA sniper nest. Although never formally task organized under 1/22 (per 1/22 After Action Report), the battalion said "tanks were employed very effectively in the city for direct fire into buildings and were invaluable in areas where there was a heavy volume of enemy fire. The ability to attack, where dismounted infantry would have taken heavy losses, was exploited."

At 1800hrs we received our first 122mm rocket attack. The Russian Kutiyusha rocket, with a range of 20 km (12 miles), hit on the east side of the compound approximately six feet from the defensive bunker, collapsed the side of the bunker and injured CPL Gangway. It is worth mentioning that we had a PPS4 radar attached to the troop, however, it proved itself worthless in the counterfire directing effort over the next few days.

The casualties we sustained, given the fact that initially we had only two-line platoons, made it impossible to either escort or strong point along Hwy 14 as well as guard bridges and our HQ perimeter at night. CPT West requested Squadron have our 2d platoon released back to us. He received approval and 2d platoon arrived on the 31st.

Monitoring radios in the commo bunker somewhere around 0100 on the 31st, I decided to make another check of the perimeter. All our revetments had tanks and ACAVs with alert guards, except for one sandbagged, tented bunker just inside our perimeter. I entered but heard no sounds. As I quickly scanned the floor with my flashlight, I

saw the boots of those sleeping, or so I thought. I told them to get up and man their position. Getting no response, I kicked the feet of one and remembered telling them to "Get the hell up...." Then my flashlight moved to show ponchos or body bags covering our dead, which we would finally evacuate later in the day. The feeling of regret for that action lives with me every day.

During the night of 30-31st and the following two days, the perimeter continued to receive sporadic small arms fire. However, major contact occurred in town and around the MACV and 24th STZ compounds. We welcomed the arrival of an AC-47 Gunship (Spooky) late that night. These planes played a significant role during the ensuing three days. Their illuminated engagements repelled major attacks against the MACV, Special Forces, 43d Signal and 24th Special Tactical Zone (ARVN) compounds in and around Kontum.

Early evening on the 31st, during the height of a firefight between NVA infiltrators and the MACV HQ, two CH-47 Chinooks dropped our requested resupply of ammunition. Due to enemy small arms fire, the ammo sling loads dropped outside our wire. 1SGT Kurabeski organized a bucket brigade to move the ammo into the ammo dump in the motor pool.

At one time on the 31st or 1st, CPT West and I



Relationship of hills in background to our perimeter  
(buildings in white) and airfield

were standing in front of the HQ building when we heard an incoming noise, looked up, and saw the trailing stream of two 122mm rockets heading to impacting somewhere on the 57th airfield just to our south or further into Kontum. It was a strange, but a comical moment, as it reminded me of one

of those old WWII movies where the captain of a ship watches as two torpedoes just miss his ship. Our perimeter was clearly in the flight path of the 122s fired from a mountain to our NNE.

Sometime during the night of 31 Jan - 1 Feb, we received an urgent call for ammo resupply from a MACV component on the other side of town. As we had received a major supply of M16 ammo that we rarely use, CPT West cobbled together two tanks and one ACAV from the 3d platoon and had them make a noisy, non-firing "thunder run" through town delivering M16 ammo and returning. The ad hoc group ran fast in tight formation, lead tank with searchlight on, ACAV loaded with M16 ammo, and trail tank with main gun to the rear.

Mid-afternoon on February 1st, an ammunition convoy tried a run from Kontum to Dak To but hit mines 8-9 km (5 miles) north of Kontum. At 1930, the convoy commander asked A Troop to recover the last trailer on the road loaded with 175mm ammo. Tank A16 and the M88 completed the difficult recovery at 2300.

One afternoon, on the 1st, CPT West, 1SG Kurabeski and I were together when incoming rounds impacted in or close to our perimeter. With the 1SG following, we headed to the commo bunker. Just as we were entering the bunker, we heard small arms rounds impact behind us. Racing out to see if the 1SG was okay, we saw him on the ground half sitting and leaning against the wall of an adjacent building. We at once called the 57th and had them cease fire on their perimeter as the rounds fired at us were clearly friendly fire from a nervous soldier on their perimeter. What was inconceivable was that the 1SG was now half smiling as he had a bullet hole through the top of his helmet yet remained unscratched; unbelievable. For the rest of his tour, he kept things light by occasionally walking around with an arrow through the bullet hole. GI humor!

Sometime during this period 2LT Serrano arrived replacing 1LT Plesko as 1st Platoon leader.

At 0315 on 2 February, the NVA launched a major rocket attack with approximately 20 122s, two of which landed in our perimeter. One hit directly on

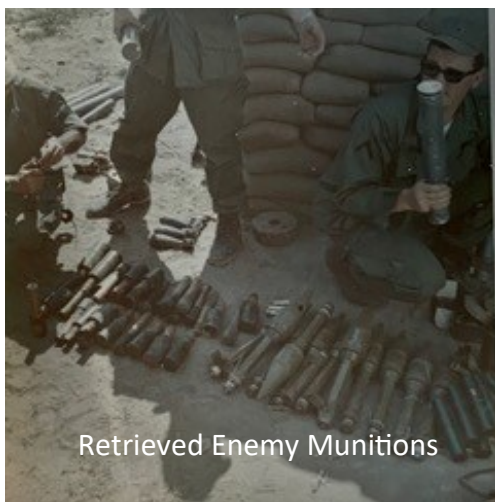
the main frame of the roof of the HQ/mess building destroying the rear 60 feet of the structure and the second struck a tree in the corner of the motor pool; neither caused any casualties. The airfield received two missiles that did minor damage. We had detected missile flashes NE of our location but had no way to know the distance from which made them impossible to spot from the air. made them impossible to spot from the air.

Later that morning, attempting to make the enemy think we knew from where they were firing, and hopefully cause them to displace, we fired several HE and/or WP tank rounds in the direction of the flashes. As tank canon have limited elevation (less than 20%), we attempted to elevate the front of the tank. A valiant attempt, however, neither our rounds nor repeated air reconnaissance of the suspected area yielded any positive results. In the week or so following, the 1-22 Infantry had major engagements with the NVA on and around Hill 684, the area from where the rockets launched.

Shortly after first light, 2LT Serrano, with his scout section, went to secure a helicopter. On the way, approximately 500m west of our HQ, an NVA pla-



toon-sized unit attacked the section. They were firing B40s and small arms, at 2LT Serrano's track and 14 but neither sustained casualties. Serrano



Retrieved Enemy Munitions

raced back to our motor pool and returned to the fight in A18. The section engaged the enemy and killed over 30. During this engagement both

2LT Serrano and SSG Galloway received minor wounds.

Later that morning, CPT West took his vehicle, 6A, along with a 3d platoon tank and a radar ACAV to coordinate night defensive positions with an element of 1/22 Infantry. Small arms fire pinned down CPT West while briefly dismounted. He remounted A6 and the section swept the area where a sniper round wounded SP4 Jeffery in the face, his fourth wound in three days. It was during this episode that our tank destroyed a church steeple used as an enemy sniper nest and the infantry killed five NVA.

In the early evening of 2 Feb, I was monitoring radios of the 1/22 fight in Kontum when a major explosion hit close to the comms bunker. I ran out to investigate and saw another 122mm rocket had hit 30 meters from the earlier one that hit the rear of the HQ building. Unfortunately, it was where we kept our water trailer and I saw one of our men down. It was SP4 Jan Gilliam, a mechanic who the motor sergeant had sent to fill canteens for folks in the maintenance section. We had lost another trooper.

During 3-5 February, our perimeter and that of the airfield had little activity with the exception that the airfield continued to receive one or two 122 rockets daily. After a failed early morning, 4 February, NVA attack on the MACV compound, activities showed the enemy stopped in their attempt to seize the Provincial Capital and had started a withdrawal in multiple directions. Their losses were significant, and they desperately needed resupply.

For A Troop, the Tet battle of Kontum was over. Almost 200 enemy bodies were found forward of our perimeter. For the 1/22 Infantry, however, the fight in the hills surrounding the city was just beginning. From the 5th through the 12th of February 1/22 fought vicious engagements against well-defended, enemy positions, particularly in the hills NE of town. Those were in areas from which so many 122mm rockets fired. 1/22s after-action report numbered 844 enemy killed and losses of 16 US KIA and 71 wounded. Slowly other cities throughout South Vietnam gained a foothold against the NVA and VC attackers. However, it was late February before cities such as Hue and Saigon were secure.

For A Troop and the 2-1 Cavalry Squadron, the rest of 1968 life returned to securing Hwy 14 and 19, as well as escorting convoys to the Ben Het Special Forces camp, only kilometers from the tri-border area and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. There were further attacks on the convoys and additional losses but Tet 68 in Kontum stayed the major A Troop engagement of the war.

**For all who served, thank you,**



COL Colin "Mac" McArthur, USA Ret.



**We remember absent colleagues, we lost during the Tet Offensive:**

<b>30 Jan - 2 Feb</b>	<b>6 March</b>
Richard Rial Glenn Brust Paul Gerlach Bob Forkl Louis Grove	Arthur Shelton

**CONTRIBUTORS**

(Their grades and positions at the time)

CPT Barry Hartman, CO C Troop 2/1	SP4 Richard Deegan
CPT Hugh Smith, 57 <sup>th</sup> AHC Service Maint	SP4 John Fellin
CPT Ron West, CO A Troop 2/1 Cav	SP4 Terry Franklin, Maint
1LT Mike Plesko, 1st Plt Ldr, A 2/1 Cav	SP4 James Frye
1LT Serrano, 1st Plt, A 2/1	SP4 Al Jurkiewicz
1LT Bill Quinn, 57th AHC Gun Platoon	SP4 Samuel Lindberg
1LT Chris Ronay, 3d Plt Ldr, A 2/1 Cav	SP4 John Michalak
1LT Dave Terry, HQ 2/1 Cav	SP4 John Moorhouse
1LT Marshall Wallach, HQ 2/1 Cav	SP4 Michael Phelan
SSG Ed Collins, 3d Plt, A/2/1 Cav	SP4 Jim Porter
SSG Harry Martin, 1st Plt, A 2/1 Cav	SP4 Michael Root
SGT Gerry Maier	SP4 Richard Russo
SP4 Gene Andren	SP4 Rich Hansell
SP4 Jerel Bottelson	
SP4 Michael Campbell, Maint	
SP4 Robert Chentfant	
SP4 Jack Conway	