

By Laurence Stern
Washington Post Service

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When B-52's thunder across Kontum from the north, their paths have been marked in advance by John Paul Vann, the American civilian adviser who is personally directing the air and ground war in the embattled central highlands.

Around the clock and at harrowing risk to his own safety, Vann has committed himself to the objective of denying his second Military Region to North Vietnamese forces.

"I expect to defeat — I expect the Vietnamese to defeat — the North Vietnamese force. I have predicted success since December," he said while fingering an untasted, neat whisky in his modest bachelor officers billet here.

INFLUENCE

This is the 11th year that the 47-year old Vann has been involved in the Vietnam war. He is now the third most influential American here, after ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and General Creighton Abrams, the U.S. commander. In battlefield experience and seniority, he stands first among high-ranking Americans.

In the era of Vietnamization, Vann's highly visible role in running the war is an anomaly. But, from his standpoint as the Second Military Region senior adviser, the military situation in the central highlands is critical and there is little time for protocol.

Some of those who have known Vann through the years say that he is overplaying his role and has become a believer in the big-war tactics of which he was once a harsh critic. "He sits out there on Mount Olympus and brings down the thunder and lightning," said one associate with equally long tenure, "but he has forgotten the political dimension of the war on the ground."

VIEW

As Vann sees it, the immediate threat is from the main-force units of the North Vietnamese army in a conventional war situation. And it is against such a threat that he insists the B-52 and tactical air strikes, numbering 160 strafing missions a day, have proven effective.

"Any time the wind is blowing from the north where the B-52 strikes are turning the terrain into a moonscape, you can tell from the battlefield stench that the strikes are effective.

"We have had more than a thousand B-52 strikes since the first of January around Kontum, as well as in Laos



JOHN PAUL VANN
'I expect to succeed'

and adjacent areas of Cambodia. It is the most extensive B-52 program of the war. It is the first time we have so many remarkable and consistently identified targets.

"Outside Kontum, wherever you dropped bombs, you scattered bodies," said Vann.

Since February 16, Vann has flown his light helicopter into Kontum every day, braving heavy ground fire and, recently, hazardous typhoon conditions.

GOAL

One of the objects of these missions is to check the strike areas for signs of enemy activity. "You do this mostly to draw fire," Vann said. One recent day, some ten rounds pierced his chopper.

Eight times a day, Vann meets with his staff to review the target areas. "We change the arflight (B-52) boxes (target sectors) on the basis of the latest intelligence. MACV, the U.S. military command, feels it is getting very good returns on each strike. My biggest kick is getting the biggest returns out of our resources," he said.

The nature of the South Vietnamese army units fighting in the central highlands is another reason Vann may have felt compelled to step into the breach. Seven of the region's northern provinces are known as "punishment provinces," and they harbor the least impressive officers

and soldiers in the Saigon government's army.

"This has had the lousiest leadership of any corps," said one prominent American here. "It's like having a deadhead as point man on the lead platoon in an attack. The Vietnamese troops are strangers in the highlands, which are populated by Montagnard tribes. They are homesick."

COUNTERPART

Vann's Vietnamese counterpart is General Nguyen Van Toan, who was relieved of his command in 1965 by now exiled General Nguyen Chanh Thi when Toan's retreating armor killed and wounded some two dozen South Vietnamese rangers in Quangtri province.

He replaced General Ngo Dzu, who was relieved by President Nguyen Van Thieu and appointed to the ministry of defense after troops under Dzu's command panicked and fled from Tan Canh and Dak To in late April when North Vietnamese tanks suddenly appeared out of the jungle.

Within the next few days government forces are expected to face major Communist attacks across the waist of the central highlands, from Kontum to the coastal district of Phy My, where heavy action is already under way. There are an estimated ten Communist regiments now regrouping for renewed attacks in the Second Region.

DEATHS

By Vann's estimate battle deaths in the region number more than 20,000 on both sides since the beginning of the year.

"I predicted last December that 10,000 enemy would die in this region. More than 15,000 have already died. I predicted that our casualties would be 5000. There have been more. In Kontum alone we have had more than 5000 enemy dead," said Vann.

Since the offensive began in March, some 200,000 refugees have poured out of the cities and villages of the northern provinces toward safer haven. Among the worst affected are the Montagnard tribal populations, who are looked down upon by the ethnic Vietnamese, and have been generally the last to be evacuated.

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He Runs the War Around Kontum