

APR 29 1972

# American Officer Says Saigon Troops, Defeated Near Kontum, Fought Poorly

NYTimes

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 28—A high-ranking American military commander here said today that the fighting performance of the South Vietnamese 22d Division in the Central Highlands had been "inadequate" and that the division's survival in the expected all-out attack by the North Vietnamese against Kontum is problematical.

The view is shared by a wide range of American advisers and commanders here.

The officer, who spoke on condition that his name not be used, said that poor leadership had led to the near rout of 22d Division troops near Kontum early this week and in Binh-dinh Province on the coast last week.

He also said, in an interview, that the United States Military Assistance Command of Gen. Creighton W. Abrams believed that the North Vietnamese would continue their offensive, concentrated on Quangtri, Kontum and Binhlong Provinces "until they're utterly exhausted."

## No Guarantee of Success

The assessment by senior commanders here contrasted at least in part with what President Nixon said in his speech Wednesday night, when he quoted a report from General Abrams as saying "the South Vietnamese are fighting courageously and well in their self-defense."

While American generals here have been critical of the 22d Division, they are said to believe that on the other fronts the Third Division, the marines and the South Vietnamese airborne troops have done better. However, they are still not satisfied, according to a high-ranking officer, that the South Vietnamese have a guarantee of success yet.

As the officer spoke, the North Vietnamese were making a new assault on Quangtri Province in the north. "That's a battle going on up there, and in a battle there are changes every hour," he said.

The 22d Division, which was responsible for the defense of a large part of the Central Highlands, was driven from its forward headquarters at Tan-canb by enemy tanks last Monday and suffered heavy losses when routed in northern Binh-dinh Province the previous Tuesday.

## Troops 'Got Scared'

"At Tan-canb, the South Vietnamese got scared," the officer said. "The enemy came in at night with tanks, and in things like that it's always a question of who gets psyched first."

"There's never a better chance to knock out tanks than close up, at night and in a constructed place where they are unmaneuverable. That's exactly what the North Vietnamese tanks were doing at Tan-canb but the South Vietnamese got scared and ran instead of knocking them out with hand weapons or light antitank weapons."

"Whenever somebody's army performs badly anywhere in the world, it's because of the leadership," the officer continued. "The men are all the same. If they perform badly it's because they got bad leadership, and you pop a guy in and put him in charge for less than a month and it's not going to work."

The 22d Division was commanded by Maj. Gen. Le Ngoc Tien until March 4, when for unspecified reasons he was replaced by Col. Le Duc Dat, the division's deputy commander. Colonel Dat was either killed or captured in the attack on Tan-canb.

## Troops Flee Positions

Most of the troops fled from their positions at Dakto and Tan-canb south to Vodinh, only a few miles away from the provincial capital of Kontum.

American advisers and the junior officers of the shattered division are now trying

to reorganize it north of and inside Kontum, which is coming under attack from the north, west and south.

"We'll see what happens," was the most optimistic assessment heard today.

The best hope of saving Kontum lies with the one brigade of about 4,000 airborne troops who were flown into the city to counter the expected North Vietnamese attack when it was in preparation last February.

The over-all commander in the Central Highlands is Maj. Gen. Ngo Dzu, who was reported by his headquarters earlier this week to have suffered a heart attack, but reliable sources said that he did not. "He's under a lot of pressure, a lot of strain," one officer said.

General Dzu, who has been extremely nervous about the possibility of a big enemy offensive in the Central Highlands since January, persuaded the Government to send in two brigades of the airborne between February and March. However, one of the brigades was pulled out last weekend—just before the offensive in Kontum Province—and sent back to Saigon to bolster the capital's defenses against the enemy push in Binhlong Province 60 miles away.

## Unit's Performance Praised

"The airborne has acquitted itself very well up there," a senior American military man said today. "There was one battalion that came under heavy attack just above Dakto but it came out as a battalion, even though it took casualties and will need replacements."

Saigon's Third Division, which was newly formed and not even fully in operation when the first huge North Vietnamese assault with tanks and artillery came at the beginning of this month in Quangtri province below the demilitarized zone, is now coming under pressure again.

The performance of its 10,000 men over the past month was described by senior American officers here as "very creditable."

The division, reinforced by nine battalions of rangers and thousands of marines, formed a defense line at the Cuaviet

River 10 miles below the demilitarized zone and held it until this morning, but failed to make a sustained effort to drive the North Vietnamese back across the zone.

The division was more intent during the last month in reforming its ranks—hundreds of soldiers fled during the initial assault to Hue and Danang far to the south, and were rounded up by military police in the days immediately afterward.

Its commander, Brig. General Vu Van Giai, has been credited with improving the morale of his men by leading the best of them back into battle himself. "Giai has a good headquarters and they held their heads cool," an American officer said.

The First Division, which has the burden of protecting the historically and symbolically important city of Hue, has gotten good marks for holding off repeated assaults on its network of artillery bases southwest of the city.

Regional forces militiamen have on several occasions beaten back attacks by seasoned North Vietnamese troops in the northern area. One senior American officer said that some militia units had performed better than regular army troops.

## Tank Force Undetected

On the front closer to Saigon, in Binh Long Province, South Vietnamese soldiers of the Fifth Division, reinforced by airborne troops, have held off repeated enemy assaults with tanks and heavy artillery for three weeks.

The biggest failure in Binhlong was not by the troops on the ground but rather by American airpower and intelligence, which did not detect and destroy 75 Russian-built T-54 tanks that made their way from North Vietnam to southeastern Cambodia during the dry season this year.

"Every day General Abrams asks his intelligence section why they didn't know those tanks were there," one officer said the other day.

"We knew the tanks were moving down through Laos, but we were never able to count them or to know that they were heading for M.R. 3," another officer said, referring to the military region close to Saigon. "That would have been pure guesswork."