



South Viet Troops Holding Their Own

— **Joseph Alsop**

Pleiku, South Vietnam

HEREABOUTS, they ask every morning, "How are they doing at An Loc?" As soldiers are self-centered, mostly, they ask because the answer will determine whether reserves are available to meet the enemy on the dangerous approaches to Kontum an Pleiku.

Nowadays, moreover, the answer to the usual question about An Loc evokes at least a passing grunt of admiration from the most hardened old pros in U.S. uniform. The fact of the matter is that "they" have been doing pretty heroically at An Loc.

Down there in III Corps, two North Vietnamese divisions, the Ninth and the Fifth, have been besieging elements of the ARVN (South Vietnamese) Fifth Division, plus some airborne and Ranger troops. An Loc is not a fortified position, either. It is an exposed little province town at the back of beyond in Vietnamese terms.

In An Loc, "they" — the ARVN soldiers — have been taking up to a couple of thousand artillery rounds each day. They have met and killed a couple of tank battalions, mostly with their own anti-tank weapons.

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AT BEST, they have been tenuously supplied, for there has been no supply except by air, and the enemy's powerful new antiaircraft guns have repeatedly throttled the supply flow. For the same reason, none of the wounded has been evacuated. After three weeks' hard fighting, there were above a thousand wounded for a couple of harrassed doctors to care for.

In short, An Loc has been a great deal

nastier than Khe Sanh, where this reporter went in 1968. Yet at home, they wrote in anguish about the "agony of Khe Sanh" whereas the defense of An Loc, when it has been noticed at all, has been customarily described with patronizing contempt. What would cause a nationwide outcry if U.S. troops were involved has become a wire service holiday because the troops involved are South Vietnamese.

It is a point worth making at Pleiku for two quite different reasons. On the one hand, the defenders of An Loc have torn the guts out of two North Vietnamese divisions, thereby most probably releasing reserves to meet the crisis up here. On the other hand, there is the contrast between the obstinate defense of An Loc and the ARVN collapse at "Tango Charlie" on the approaches to Kontum here in the Central Highlands.

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TO PUT the thing in proportion, ARVN has the equivalent of 15 divisions, if you count the tough little Ranger groups. All have been engaged. Most have been heavily, even murderously, engaged since the North Vietnamese offensive began.

Outside the southern Delta, all have been required to deal with the new factors — large numbers of tanks, massive barrages of heavy artillery and heavy use of antiaircraft guns to impede airlifted supply and medical evacuation—that the Hanoi war-planners counted on for victory. Yet of the 15 ARVN divisional equivalents, only a single one, at Tan Canh, or "Tango Charlie," on Kontum's approaches, has not met the test.

That is not bad going for any army in a quite new and much more dangerous kind of war.