

## In his last letter, John Vann was elated by Viet successes

WASHINGTON—By a cruel irony, a friendly letter from John Paul Vann arrived last Tuesday. Four full days earlier, the tragic news had come that Vann, the single most experienced and prescient American in South Vietnam, had been killed in a helicopter crash in line of duty.

This, then, must have been one of the last letters written by this wonderfully brave and patriotic man. (He always handled his own private correspondence, in a rather crabbed longhand, and always at the end of one of those long days of dangerous work in the field that would have put most younger men to bed for a week.) The letter also had a wider message, so those parts which are not overly personal deserve reproduction.

"It is true," wrote Vann, the American organizer of the defense of Kontum in the Central Highlands, "we're going to hold Kontum. . .the enemy is beating himself to death against it . . . the best defense of Pleiku (the main position in the highlands) was to hold Kontum. We got (the reinforcement of Kontum with the ARVN 23rd Division) accomplished just one day prior to the enemy's opening assault. . ."

(Here followed technical and detailed estimates of enemy losses, amounting to the equivalent of close to a division at Kontum and two and one-half North Vietnamese divisions, overall, since mid-February in Vann's II Corps area.)

"My 12 April predictions (of enemy defeat, already reported in this space) are holding quite well. . .and they were made without the certainty of the tremendously courageous and timely decisions by the President (concerning the North Vietnamese ports and the bombing, obviously). With those decisions, I now have absolute certainty that (the Hanoi leaders have) committed a blunder equal to or greater than that of Tet '68. . ."

"Barring a negotiated settlement at Paris, the enemy has had it—and will not constitute a credible threat for sever-

al years hence, which will then be irrelevant."

The letter closed, heartbreakingly, with word that John Paul Vann could not be in Washington "in July. . .could not afford to miss the (a planned counteroffensive) we're going to have that month." One day after John Vann's letter, still another came from the chief American in command on the approaches of Saigon, Maj. Gen. James Hollingsworth. Gen. Hollingsworth, another exceptional American, was reporting on the failure of the North Vietnamese siege of An Loc.

"I would think the enemy is fully aware of their total disaster," he wrote. "Two and two-thirds divisions (of North Vietnamese troops) is one helluva rent to pay for 25 per cent of a small, inconsequential province capital for less than 30 days' occupancy by two battered companies."

That letter arrived simultaneously with the news of the final relief of An Loc in the morning papers. As the letter was being opened, a smooth-faced young man on the Columbia Broadcasting System's morning news program was telling the world all about Vietnam. One listener wondered idly how much of danger and, indeed, how much of his country's service this young man had seen.

At any rate, he sounded quite as sure of himself as Vann or Hollingsworth when he told his vast audience that it began to seem Hanoi had made a voluntary decision to call off the big offensive. The idea was, of course, that there had been no North Vietnamese defeat at An Loc; that Hanoi's leaders had just said to themselves, "Oh, shucks, why not call it a day?"

Of course, Hanoi's leaders have not said that, at least not yet.

By all the signs, despite the hideous North Vietnamese losses and heavy defeats, there are still battles to be fought. Battles can always bring bad news. Ad interim, however, even the newspapers utterly failed to convey how good the news was from An Loc.