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Thomas P. McKenna. *Kontum: The Battle to Save South Vietnam.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. xvi + 344 pp. Illustrations. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3398-0; ISBN 978-0-8131-3401-7.

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Unable to capture Saigon and unify Vietnam during the 1968 Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese launched their second major invasion of the Republic of Vietnam in 1972. Unlike in 1968 when Viet Cong cadres carried the burden of war making, the 1972 Easter Offensive involved three North Vietnamese Army (NVA) divisions with artillery and tanks. This conventional invasion occurred after the extensive withdrawal of American ground forces, with only the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and limited American military support standing between North Vietnam and South Vietnam's defeat. In *Kontum: The Battle To Save South Vietnam*, historian and Vietnam War veteran Thomas P. McKenna recounts the events comprising the Easter Offensive. Having participated in the battle of Kontum, the author sees existing histories of the engagement as rife with inaccuracies and far from complete. In righting these wrongs, McKenna places the battle of Kontum in the broader context of the Easter Offensive. He does this by discussing decision makers like John Paul Vann, and analyzing the conduct of the South Vietnamese military and its U.S. Army advisors during the invasion.

Organized chronologically into twenty short chapters, plus a prologue and epilogue, Kontum takes readers through a detailed explanation of the actions by American advisors and the South Vietnamese during the battle of Kontum, as well as a discussion of North Vietnam's General Vo Nguyen Giap and his invasion plans. McKenna's chapters emerge from an extensive assemblage of primary sources, particularly firsthand accounts, oral interviews, and official reports. McKenna makes considerable use of secondary sources when contextualizing his discussions. Historiographically, McKenna's book complements Dale Andradé's *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (2001) and Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* (2009). While Andradé focuses on the Easter Offensive and Sheehan's work is a detailed assessment of John Paul Vann, neither scholar provided a thorough analysis of the battle of Kontum. Conversely, McKenna's contribution delves deeper into the battle of Kontum while using Vann to help explain American decision-making processes and the actions of U.S. advisors. While contextualizing the actions of U.S. Army advisors, McKenna provides a fair and balanced assessment of Easter Offensive participants. The author frequently discusses the role of John Paul Vann in the defense of South Vietnam. Vann is seen almost as a larger-than-life character and one who understood the South Vietnamese and the war better than most of his contemporaries. For McKenna, to understand the battle of Kontum, one must see Vann's leadership as a key factor in the U.S and South Vietnamese victory at Kontum.

A significant fruit of McKenna's labor is further substantiation of Qiang Zhai's thesis–as presented in *China and The Vietnam Wars: 1950-1975* (2000)–that the North Vietnamese were better supplied than the South Vietnamese. McKenna uses comparisons between Soviet- and U.S.-made artillery and armor to address the ground firepower disadvantages experienced by the ARVN and its American advisors (pp. 61-62). While these shortcomings were in part offset by the U.S. and South Vietnamese airpower, the NVA deployed the latest in Soviet mobile air defense weaponry. It seemed that the solution to these NVA advantages were Arc Light raids and sorties by fixed wing and helicopter aircraft.

Building up to the battle of Kontum, McKenna discusses ARVN shortcomings, particularly problematic generalship and questionable behavior of South Vietnamese troops. The author uses General Ngo Dzu's lack of attention and will to prosecute the war as an example of the leadership woes U.S. advisors dealt with while in Vietnam. A far worse instance of bad ARVN leadership and conduct were the actions of Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Dinh, who surrendered his forces and allied himself with the North Vietnamese. However, the author mentions that Dinh's defection is the only known

instance of an ARVN unit changing allegiances during the war (p. 65). Perhaps a more compelling negative portrayal of the South Vietnamese military than Dinh is the Vietnam Air Force (VNAF). The charging of fees by VNAF crew members to evacuate civilians during the Easter Offensive, argues McKenna, forever tarnished the image of the South Vietnamese military in the eyes of American advisors (p. 150).

Leadership problems and bad soldiering aside, McKenna emphasizes the instances of ARVN bravery and determination in battle (p. 67). Throughout the book, the author highlights the heroic efforts of the ARVN Ranger units that faced overwhelming odds against NVA forces. So too does McKenna address the resilience of the 23rd ARVN Division that defended Kontum. While contemporary reports emphasized the willingness of ARVN cadres to run instead of fight the enemy, the 23rd Division stood its ground against three NVA divisions. For McKenna, "in the end, everything depended on the individual ARVN soldiers, their officers, and their NCOs. It was those men on the ground who withstood almost continuous artillery, rocket, and mortar fire and repeated assaults by enemy infantry and tanks. They also counterattacked again and again to regain lost ground." He adds, "Another key factor in our victory was the personal leadership of men such as John Paul Vann and Brigadier General Ly Tong Ba. Unlike Colonel Le Duc Dat at Tan Canh, Brigadier General Ba took an active role in the fighting and provided his troops with the leadership they need to win the battle" (p. 267). Often downplayed in the annals of the war, the role of the ARVN is given proper credit by McKenna.

One question left unanswered by McKenna is the role of Colonel Ba, the commander of the 23rd ARVN Division, in the decision to defend Kontum. The author discusses the colonel only from the angle of Vann and Ba's superiors. In *Hell in An Loc: The 1972 Easter Invasion and the Battle that Saved South Viet Nam* (2009), Lam Quang Thi contends that Colonel Ba chose Kontum as the site at which the ARVN would confront the invading NVA divisions. Lam Quang Thi states that Vann pressed for aggressive counterattacks in the central highlands, only accepting Colonel Ba's more conservative decision to wait for the NVA at Kontum in hindsight. Given that McKenna discusses the series of events leading up to the battle of Kontum, it would have been useful if the author grappled with Lam Quang Thi's analysis of Colonel Ba.

Much of what emerges from Kontum is further proof that the Republic of Vietnam needed the continued assistance of the United States. Readers unfamiliar with later stages of the Vietnam War will enjoy McKenna's attention to detail, particularly his account of the battle of Kontum and the realities faced by American advisors. This book is a worthy addition to the field because it substantiates earlier works on the Easter Offensive as well as studies of Vietnamization and the ARVN. Moreover, since McKenna is offering his own firsthand account of the invasion, Kontum is a primary source in its own right.

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