

*NEW SCHOLARSHIP ON THE FALL OF SOUTH VIETNAM***KONTUM: The Battle to Save South Vietnam**

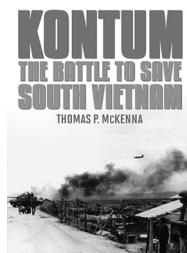
By Thomas P. McKenna

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Thomas McKenna in *Kontum* writes a thorough and insightful account about the Easter Offensive launched by the North Vietnamese in Spring 1972. McKenna rightfully asserts that the massive operation conducted by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) was the largest military offensive since the Chinese incursion across the Yalu River in Korea in October 1950. Furthermore, he makes the argument that the NVA launched the massive invasion “because they thought that the Vietnamization was succeeding.” Additionally, he makes a very strong point that this major combat action took place as President Nixon announced a reduction of 20,000 troops in Vietnam. This point becomes significant as McKenna highlights the fact that no US ground forces participated in the fight. So as to not confuse the point, McKenna provides a detailed discussion of the role of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MAVC) advisors in the Easter Offensive. In addition, McKenna, who was an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) advisor in Kontum, highlights the role the United States Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and Army aviation assets played in the fight to blunt and repel the North’s attack. For McKenna the triumph of ARVN and US advisors during the Easter Offensive serves as a critical success within the larger public understanding of Vietnam as a failure, especially in the post Tet Offensive period.

To advance his sound and well-supported argument, McKenna focuses on providing the reader with a detailed understanding of the overall strategic situation in Vietnam in the spring of 1972. In addition to balancing the demands of the desire of the United States to withdraw and significantly reduce its military commitments to South Vietnam, while preparing and building ARVN forces for the eventual overall withdrawal of all US forces, McKenna skillfully elaborates on the tactical capabilities and organization of the NVA. For McKenna, a significant point is that the North Vietnamese Army was equipped with weapons from the Soviet Union and China. The NVA possessed modern T-54 tanks and shoulder-fired SA-7 anti-aircraft surface-to-air missiles. Yet these modern advancements contrasted with the recruiting needs of the NVA which required harsh impressment tactics to build the necessary manpower to launch the North Vietnamese invasion. Beyond just providing statistics and commentary on the nature of the NVA prior to the invasion, the chapters in which McKenna presents these significant points become critical to understanding that the war in 1972 was far from over and that despite the typical narrative that ARVN could not stand and fight, he highlights that they did with the support of US air power.

McKenna’s analysis is spot-on and at times almost seems to provide some hope that the South Vietnamese can ultimately defend themselves against the expanding capabilities and strength of the NVA. However,



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McKenna is quick to note that these hopeful sentiments are quickly tempered by the reality that ARVN forces range from totally incompetent to very capable and strong fighting units. The main problem he points out was that South Vietnam failed to have a unified and committed military that could readily defend itself against additional attacks from the North without the aid of the United States. In the end, he conveys a tragic story in which the eventual downfall of South Vietnam is inevitable.

Although McKenna's objective is to highlight the actions that took place at Kontum, he also provides a general overview of the entire Easter Offensive as it raged in the II and III Corps across South Vietnam. Even though McKenna admits that his book is not a complete history of the Easter Offensive and he strives to present only enough information to understand its context, he does indeed end up providing a very strong understanding of the situation in South Vietnam in the spring of 1972. However, as a result of his intent, McKenna leaves the reader wanting a more comprehensive account of the actions taking place in other areas. To satisfy this wish, it would be best to read McKenna's book in conjunction with *Abandoning Vietnam and An Loc* by James H. Willbanks. Willbanks, who also served as a US Army advisor in Vietnam during the Easter Offensive, provides a thorough understanding of the broad military and political context in *Abandoning Vietnam*, and a specific history of the battle of An Loc, which took place during the Easter Offensive as well. In many ways these two additional works provide complementary material to McKenna's and reinforce his overall thesis. Together, these works provide a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the war in Vietnam at a time when many people did not realize that a significant conventional military fight was occurring. This is not to say that McKenna's work does not stand on its own but rather, in conjunction with the works written by Willbanks, the reader gets a more detailed understanding of the overall significance of the Easter Offensive in the history of the US involvement in Vietnam.

Beyond being just a history of the Battle of Kontum, McKenna's well-written and balanced account provides exceptional insights in the NVA, ARVN, and the withering commitment of the United States. Kontum deserves serious attention by people interested in understanding the political, military, and tactical history of the major conventional operations that took place in the Spring of 1972. In the end, McKenna impressively supports his thesis. He logically argues that although the NVA launched the Easter Offensive to end Nixon's presidency, break the willingness of ARVN to continue fighting, and test the commitment of US air power, they failed to achieve any of their objectives. They were ultimately forced to negotiate with the United States, while refitting and rebuilding for their invasion in 1975 which was ultimately successful.