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Street fighting: lessons learned from the Battle for Hue for 21st century urban warfare

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STREET FIGHTING:
LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE BATTLE FOR HUE
FOR 21st CENTURY URBAN WARFARE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts

in

The Interdepartmental Program
In Liberal Arts

by
Edward J. O'Neill, IV
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ABSTRACT

Increasing urbanization in a global setting of political and economic instability indicates that urban warfare may well be the major conflict scenario of the 21st century. The United States armed forces are not currently prepared to meet that challenge. The last major urban conflict involving the American military was the Battle of Hue during the Vietnam War. As part of the Tet Offensive in 1968, Communist forces seized control of Hue and held it for nearly a month.

Having undergone intensive tactical training for their mission, the enemy, solidly entrenched in buildings of various kinds, offered fierce resistance to the American and South Vietnamese troops who tried to reconquer the city. U.S. Marines bore the brunt of the fighting. Untrained and unequipped for street-fighting, they encountered immense difficulties in clearing Hue. Faulty intelligence, command and control problems, and a lack of proper equipment made the experience a nightmarish one and the human cost was considerable: 147 Marines and seventy-four soldiers lost their lives, while a combined total of 1,364 were wounded. Only through raw determination, superior firepower, and adaptive leadership were the Marines able to prevail.

The Battle of Hue offered critical lessons for subsequent military planners. Later conflicts in places such as Somalia and Afghanistan suggested that Hue might be more relevant than expected for contemporary warfare. As a result, the U.S. armed forces have made significant strides toward correcting deficiencies in the areas of doctrine, training, and equipment. However, they remain under-prepared for urban warfare because they are still not training as a joint and combined arms team across the full spectrum of operations. This is in large part due to continued shortfalls in training infrastructure and

lack of equipment. U.S. armed forces must continue to maximize urban operations training at every level in order to validate doctrine, learn how to fight, and develop specialized equipment for urban operations.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The best lesson learned is that imagination and aggressiveness are the best weapons in our arsenal. The Marines who fought the battle used those weapons.

- Captain George R. Christmas, CO, Company H, 2-5 Marines¹

After further reflection upon the brutal combat at Hue in 1968, Captain George R. Christmas, newly decorated with the Navy Cross, expressed those thoughts that symbolized the heroic deeds of countless Marines and soldiers who fought and died in one of the most significant urban battles since World War II. Several historians have written detailed accounts of the bloody battles that raged to recapture Hue, yet they have all slighted the crucial lessons learned and tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) developed by U.S. Marines and, more importantly, their applicability for the battlefield of today and tomorrow. This thesis analyzes the Battle of Hue in order to pinpoint those hard-fought TTPs learned in an urban conflict and suggest lessons for training for future conflicts in an ever-volatile urban environment.

American armed forces, particularly the Army and Marine Corps, devoted little attention to urban warfare during the 1960s. United States strategy focused on massed conventional warfare on the German plains and on emerging jungle war fighting. U.S. military doctrine gave only a cursory glance at urban operations. In effect, U.S. land warfare doctrine concentrated on potential conflict with the Soviet Union in Europe and on small-scale conventional operations to contain the spread of Communism throughout

¹ George R. Christmas, "A Company Commander Reflects on Operation Hue City," *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1971, 19-38.

Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa, where very few battles would be urban in nature.

A fresh perspective on urban operations shapes this examination of lessons derived from the Battle of Hue. Most studies to date focus on the overall operations conducted there as part of a larger assessment of the Tet offensive; however, the evolving trend of urban conflicts makes Hue a valuable case study in urban warfare that yields insights into the likely impact of terrain, tactics, techniques, and training that are essential on tomorrow's battlefield.

This thesis explores the significance of the battle in relation to the overall defeat of the North Vietnamese during the Tet offensive and the impact the Battle for Hue had on evolving tactics and the changing nature of warfare. It considers urban operations from both the U.S. and North Vietnamese perspective to determine how each viewed the other and their adaptive techniques. It provides a different approach to analyzing the pertinent lessons learned and TTPs derived during the battle to meet the Marines' immediate needs to root out an entrenched enemy in difficult terrain. Finally, this work provides a tactical model for future ground conflicts in urban environments.

As the world's resources become scarce, there is a movement of populations from rural to urban areas. Current estimates show that by 2025, nearly 85 percent of the world's population will reside within urban cities and megalopolises.² The quest for survival and wealth will ignite urban conflicts that probably will cause devastating casualties among combatants and civilians. Adversarial forces seek to use urban terrain as an important enabler against U.S. technological and resource superiority. This causes

² John J. Stanton, "Training Marines for War in the City," [article on-line]; available from <http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/6453/jstanton.html>; Internet; accessed 07 April 2000.

American armed forces to reexamine the Cold War era urban war-fighting doctrine in order to develop an evolving doctrine to meet the challenges of urban operations.

The Battle for Hue presents a sterling example of the potential challenges U.S. forces may face in urban areas. Setting the stage for the Battle for Hue requires an historical overview of when and how the U.S. deployed large ground forces to South Vietnam and what North Vietnam's plan was to coerce the U.S. into leaving South Vietnam and end the conflict.

President Lyndon Johnson, fearful of a communist seizure of the Republic of South Vietnam (RVN), on March 6, 1965 authorized the landing of two battalions of the U.S. 9th Marine Expeditionary Force to secure the U.S. air base at DaNang, South Vietnam.³ These forces began landing on March 8, 1965 and commenced the process of taking control of combat operations throughout South Vietnam. Within a month, Johnson authorized U.S. ground forces to build-up combat power and initiated offensive combat operations in Vietnam to support the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) government and assist in training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Prior to these events, U.S. forces had limited their efforts to supporting the RVN government with advisors and tactical air support to assist ARVN forces in routing the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) forces. The inability of the South Vietnamese to contain North Vietnamese forces caused Johnson to commit U.S. ground forces to defend South Vietnam. The deployment of U.S. Marines and subsequent massive build-up of forces marked a substantial shift in U.S. policy with regard to South Vietnam and containment of Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. By the end of 1965 there were 184,300

³ John S. Bowman, *The Vietnam War: An Almanac* (New York: World Almanac Publications, 1985), 108.

American troops in Vietnam and that number more than doubled over the next two years, a clear demonstration of U.S. resolve to support the South Vietnamese government.⁴

General William C. Westmoreland, Commander, U.S. Military Advisory Command Vietnam (MACV) deployed U.S. ground forces throughout South Vietnam to augment ARVN units and prevent the seizure of major cities and villages. Military planners divided Vietnam into four corps tactical zones and conducted combat operations against NVA and VC forces. U.S. troops fought their first major engagement against large concentrations of NVA regulars in the Ia Drang valley in November 1965. Although the NVA soldiers demonstrated their competence as jungle warriors, the overwhelming capabilities of airpower, heli-borne assault, superior firepower and maneuver proved too much for them, causing the Communist political leaders to reevaluate its strategy against the United States. Allied large-scale search and destroy operations caused significant attrition among NVA/VC personnel, faster than they could recruit replacements. The success of U.S. and South Vietnamese operations between November 1965 and December 1967, however, did not stop NVA infiltration into South Vietnam.⁵ Despite the stalemate at the end of 1967 and intelligence indications that a major Communist offensive was imminent, General Westmoreland, recalled to Washington to brief President Johnson, was optimistic about the course of the war. As he remarked at the National Press Club on November 21, 1967, “We were currently moving into what I now called Phase Three, in which in addition to continuing to destroy the enemy, we were to increase our efforts to build up the Vietnamese armed forces. Then in

⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁵ James J. Wirtz, *The TET Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 32-51.

a final Phase Four we would begin to ‘phase down’ American units while turning over more and more responsibility to the Vietnamese.”⁶

The Communist campaign plan of 1968, *Tong Kong Kich-Tong Khoi Nghia (TCK-TKN) – General Offensive-General Uprising*⁷, would not only alter Westmoreland’s plan for withdrawal but topple an American president. What was unique about TCK-TKN was the scope of the operation, the level of detailed planning and preparation, and the synchronized execution never before witnessed during the Vietnam War. Hanoi’s plan demonstrated overwhelming resolve to continue the fighting until achievement of its strategic and operational objectives.

The planning for the Tet offensive commenced at the conclusion of the 13th Plenum of the Communist Party of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the spring of 1967 in Hanoi. Communist leaders decided the time was right for an all-out effort to strike a decisive blow against the South Vietnamese and their allies. This grand offensive had to offset the devastating losses inflicted by vigorous U.S. and ARVN operations. Its purpose was threefold: provoke a general uprising among the South Vietnamese people, destroy ARVN forces in a series of decisive battles, and erode American political and military will.⁸ The campaign plan called for assaults on large American bases and headquarters, triggering U.S. forces to protect those installations and leaving ARVN units to defend the major urban centers. The offensive involved attacks on every major South Vietnamese city. The Communists used the summer and fall of 1967 to move massive numbers of troops, equipment, and supplies into the countryside near major cities. Phase

⁶ William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 234.

⁷ Eric Hammel, *Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, 1968* (California: Pacifica Press, 1991), 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

1 of TCK-TKN began in the autumn of 1967 when Communist forces struck along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in the Central Highlands concentrated around Con Thien. These attacks resulted in significant NVA losses in both experienced manpower and equipment. Those battles at Loc Ninh, Song Be and Dak To, revealed that NVA forces could not decisively engage U.S. ground forces because of the latter's overwhelming firepower and mobility. Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap altered the campaign plan by shifting targets from American to ARVN units.⁹ On January 21, 1968, Phase II of the Communist plan commenced with the attack on the large U.S. Marine airbase at Khe Sanh. The Communist leaders' intent was to replicate the 1954 victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu by destroying an isolated U.S. outpost with two NVA divisions.¹⁰ This would divert Allied attention away from coastal cities leaving them more vulnerable to attack while eroding the American people's confidence and creating a public outcry to end the war. President Johnson demanded assurance from General Westmoreland and the U.S. armed forces that Khe Sanh would not fall, creating the conditions the North Vietnamese desired.

While the siege of Khe Sanh drew American attention and valuable air and artillery assets to its defense and away from the major South Vietnamese cities, the Communists launched their main offensive in the early morning hours of January 31. The plan was to attack more than 100 cities and towns, thirty-six of forty-four provincial capitals, five of six major cities especially, Saigon and Hue, with over 67,000 North Vietnamese troops.¹¹ During the Tet holiday cease-fire, Communist troops infiltrated

⁹ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 4.

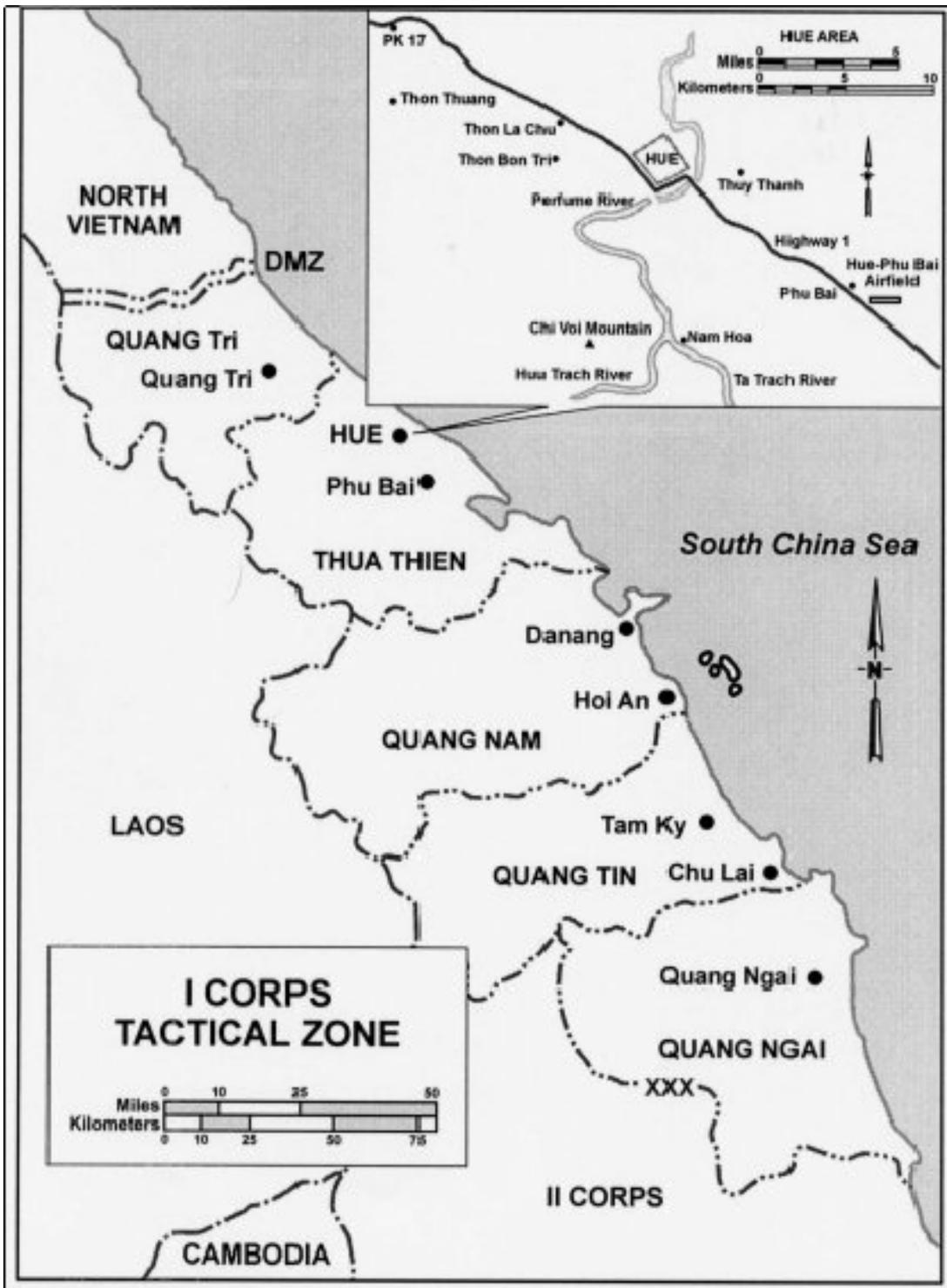
¹⁰ Spencer C. Tucker, *Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 132-136.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

men, dressed in civilian attire, and equipment into the cities to await the signal to act. The attackers hoped their adversaries would be scattered and stretched thin in the face of sudden assaults on every front, and thus unable to mass and maneuver their firepower.¹² Many South Vietnamese troops were on holiday leave, so Communist forces initially enjoyed widespread success. However, within days of the initial assaults, U.S. and ARVN forces had defeated nearly every attack, allowing General Westmoreland to concentrate his effort in the I Corps Tactical Zone (see Map 1).

The Battle for Hue began in the late hours of January 30, 1968 with an initial assault on outposts south of Hue. Intelligence reports from throughout the country pointed to the strong presence of Communist forces and the scope of their plan. The early morning assault on Hue on January 31 nonetheless met little resistance and resulted in the capture of the Imperial Palace and seizure of the Citadel and strategic points throughout Hue City – a success that reflected the detailed tactical planning that Communist leaders had undertaken to secure their operational objectives. The battle that ensued to recapture Hue marked the end of American resolve in South Vietnam. The horrific urban fighting demonstrated a need for new tactics and techniques, requiring the U.S. Marines and soldiers to become inventive and adaptive towards the North Vietnamese attacks. It marked a significant shift in the nature of warfare from the rice paddies and jungles of the Ia Drang Valley to the city streets.

¹² Don Oberdorfer, *Tet* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 117.



MAP 1 - I CORPS TACTICAL ZONE (ICTZ)¹³

¹³ Jack Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, The Defining Year 1968* [book on-line] (Washington DC: Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, History and Museums Division, 1997, accessed 6 October 2002); available from <http://www.ehistory.com/Vietnam/books/1968/0000.cfm>; Internet; 165.

CHAPTER 2

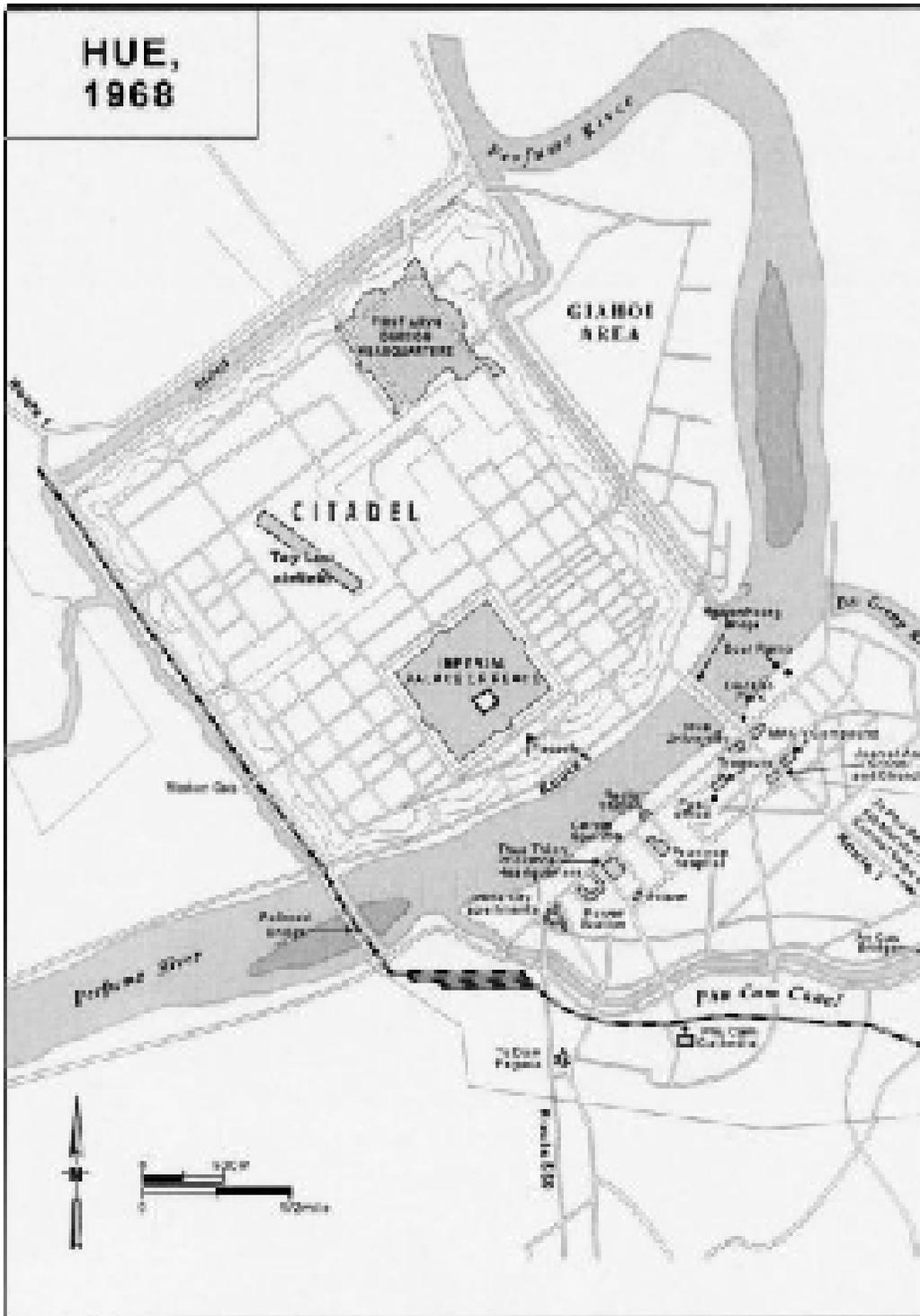
BATTLE FOR HUE

Operation Hue City was an unplanned operation evolving from a contact made by a reaction company on entering Hue City The nature of the terrain and the stubborn 'hold at all cost' tactics of the enemy forces introduced a new concept of warfare to the Marines in Vietnam. - Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, Commanding Officer, 1st Marine Regiment¹⁴

The bloodiest and most destructive battle of the Tet Offensive occurred in Hue, the most venerated city in Vietnam. Located astride Highway 1, ten kilometers west of the coast and a hundred kilometers south of the DMZ, Hue was the capital of Thua Thien Province and South Vietnam's third largest city, with a wartime population of 140,000 (see Map 2). It was the old imperial capital and served as the cultural and intellectual center of Vietnam. Although sporadic mortar and rocket attacks occurred in the surrounding areas, Hue itself remained relatively peaceful and secure prior to Tet in 1968; indeed, until then the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese treated it almost as an open city. Nevertheless, Hue was on one of the principal land supply routes for the allied forces occupying positions along the DMZ to the north. Hue also served as a major unloading point for waterborne supplies brought inland on the river from Da Nang on the coast.

Hue was really two cities divided by the Song Huong, or River of Perfume, which flowed through the city, from the southwest to the northeast on its way to the South China Sea. Two-thirds of the city's population lived north of the river within the walls of the Old City, or Citadel, a picturesque place of gardens, moats, and intricate stone buildings.

¹⁴ Headquarters, 1st Marine Regiment (Rein), 1st Marine Division (Rein), *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)* (San Francisco: Headquarters 1st Marine Regiment, 1968), 81.



MAP 2 – HUE CITY¹⁵

¹⁵ Jack Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam, The Defining Year 1968* [book on-line] (Washington DC: Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, History and Museums Division, 1997, accessed 6 October 2002); available from <http://www.ehistory.com/Vietnam/books/1968/0000.cfm>; Internet; 160.

The Citadel was an imposing fortress, begun in 1802 by Emperor Gia Long with the aid of the French and modeled on Peking's Forbidden City. Once the residence of the Annamese emperors who ruled the central portion of present-day Vietnam, the Citadel covered three square miles and included three concentric cities and a labyrinth of readily defensible positions. Surrounded by a zigzagging moat, ninety-feet wide and up to twelve feet deep, the Citadel was protected by an outer wall six meters high and up to seventy-five meters thick that formed a square about 2,500 meters on each side. Three sides were straight, while the fourth wall curved slightly to follow the contour of the river. The walls, honeycombed with bunkers and tunnels constructed by the Japanese when they occupied the city during World War II, created an almost impregnable defense.

The Citadel contained block after block of row houses, parks, villas, shops, various buildings, and an airstrip. Within the Citadel was another walled city, the Imperial Palace compound, where the emperors had held court until 1883 when the French returned to take control of Vietnam. Located at the south end of the Citadel, the palace was essentially a square with twenty-foot high walls that measured 700 meters to a side. The Citadel and the Imperial Palace were a "camera-toting tourist's dream," but they would prove to be "a rifle-toting infantryman's nightmare."¹⁶

South of the river and linked to the Citadel by the six-span Nguyen Hoang Bridge, over which Highway 1 passed, lay the modern portion of the city. This was about half the size of the Citadel, and about a third of the city's population resided there. The southern half of Hue contained the hospital, the provincial prison, the Catholic cathedral

¹⁶ Edward F. Murphy, *Semper Fi Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), 188.

and many of the city's modern structures, including government administrative buildings, the U.S. Consulate, Hue University, the city's high school, and the newer residential districts.

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) 1st Infantry Division, headquartered in Hue, had the majority of its forces in occupied areas along Highway 1, from Hue north toward the DMZ. The division headquarters was located in the northwest corner of the Citadel in a fortified compound protected by 6-to-8-foot high walls, topped by barbed wire. The closest South Vietnamese unit was the 3rd ARVN Regiment with three battalions, located seventeen kilometers northwest of Hue at the former French army base, Post Kilometer 17 (PK17). A fourth ARVN battalion operated some miles southwest of the city. The only combat element in the city itself was the division's Hac Bao Company, known as the "Black Panthers," an elite all-volunteer unit that served as the division reconnaissance and rapid reaction force. Security within the city was primarily the responsibility of the National Police.

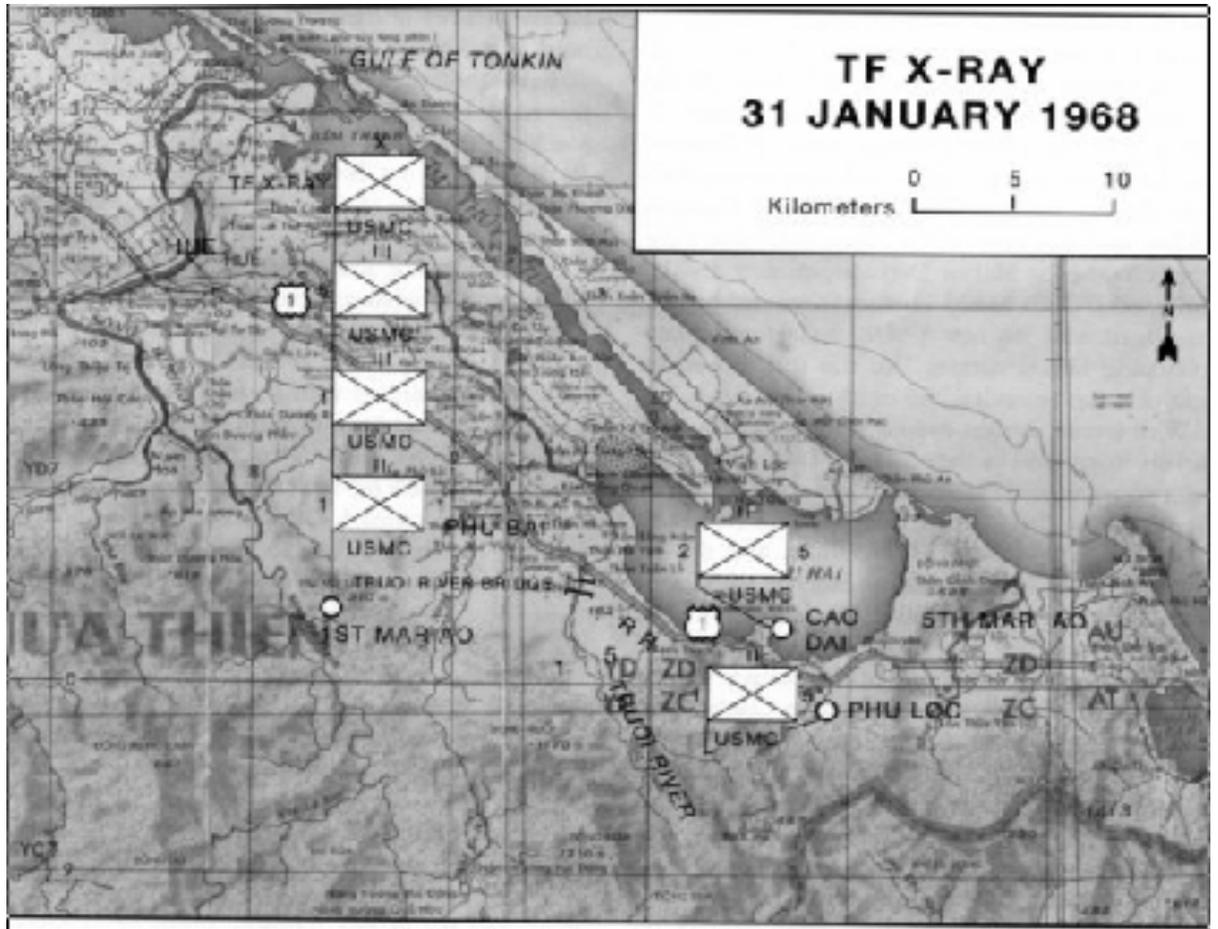
The only U.S. military presence in Hue when the battle began was the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) compound, which housed 200 U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps, and Australian officers and men who served as advisors to the 1st ARVN Division. They maintained a lightly fortified compound on the eastern edge of the modern part of the city south of the river about a block and a half south of the Nguyen Hoang Bridge. The MACV compound was hardly more than it had been in its former life: a hotel for transient advisors supported by some permanently billeted administrative personnel.¹⁷

¹⁷ Eric Hammel, *Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, 1968* (California: Pacifica Press, 1991), 9.

The nearest U.S. combat base was at Phu Bai, eight miles south along Highway 1. Phu Bai was a major U.S. Marine Corps command post and support facility that was home of Task Force X-Ray (see Map 3), established as a forward headquarters of the U.S. 1st Marine Division. The task force, commanded by Brigadier General Foster C. “Frosty” LaHue, Assistant Commander of the 1st Marine Division, consisted of two Marine regimental headquarters and three battalions -- the 5th Regiment with two battalions and the 1st Regiment with one battalion. LaHue and most of the troops had only arrived recently in the Phu Bai area, displacing from DaNang, and were still becoming acquainted with the area of operations when the Communists launched the attack on Hue.

In addition to the Marines, there were also U.S. Army units in the area. Two brigades of the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division occupied positions over a wide area from Phu Bai in the south to Landing Zone (LZ) Jane just south of Quang Tri in the north. The 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division had recently been attached to the 1st Cavalry Division and had just arrived at Camp Evans (located north along Highway 1 between Hue and Quang Tri), coming north from its previous area of operations as part of a major shuffle of forces into and out of the I Corps Tactical Zone. The road networks extending from Phu Bai through Hue, PK 17, and Camp Evans were choked with elements from the 1st Marine, 101st Airborne and 1st Cavalry Divisions.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid., 12.



MAP 3 - TASK FORCE X-RAY AT PHU BAI¹⁹

¹⁹ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 170.

Opposing the allied forces in the Hue region were 5,000 Communist troops, ten battalions under the direct leadership of the commanding general of the Communist Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region (encompassing Quang Tri and Thuan Thien provinces).²⁰ These were highly trained North Vietnamese Army (NVA) units that had come south either across the DMZ, or more likely, down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Heavily armed with AK47 assault rifles, RPD machineguns, and B-40 rocket propelled grenade launchers, NVA forces prepared for the imminent encounter with U.S. forces. In addition, the NVA forces had 107mm, 122mm, and 140mm free-flight rockets, 82mm and 120mm mortars, recoilless rifles, and heavy machineguns. Six Viet Cong main force battalions, including the 12th and Hue City Sapper Battalions joined the North Vietnamese units.²¹ A typical main force VC infantry battalion consisted of 300-600 skilled veteran fighters. The VC soldiers, armed similarly to the NVA, did not possess some of the heavier weapons. During the course of the Battle for Hue, the total Communist force in and around the city grew to twenty battalions when three additional infantry regiments relocated to the Hue area from the Khe Sanh battlefield.

Before the Tet Offensive began, the Communists prepared extensive plans for the attack on Hue, directed by General Tran Van Quang, commander of the B4 (Tri-Thien-Hue) Front. The plan (see Map 4) called for a division-size assault on the city, while other forces isolated access to the city to preclude allied reinforcements. Quang and his senior commanders believed that once the city's populace realized the superiority of the Communist troops, the people would immediately rise up to join forces with them against the Americans and the South Vietnamese, driving them out of Hue. Possessing very

²⁰ Ibid., 29.

²¹ Pham Van Son, *The Viet Cong TET Offensive* (Saigon: Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, 1969), 248.

detailed information on civil and military installations within the city, the Communist planners divided Hue into four tactical areas and prepared a list of 314 targets within the city.²³ They planned to use more than 5,000 soldiers to assault the city. Communist documents captured during and after the Tet offensive indicate that enemy troops received intensive training in city street-fighting techniques before the offensive began.²⁴ Extremely adept at combat in the jungles and rice paddies, NVA and VC soldiers required additional training to prepare for the special requirements of fighting in urban terrain. The training focused on individual and unit tasks including offensive tactics and urban techniques and procedures - such as sapper actions, disguise and infiltration, raids on mechanized forces, encirclement and isolation tactics, and mine attacks - to assist in quickly capturing the city and defensive measures to help the Communists hold it once they had seized it.

The enemy had carefully selected the time for the attack. Because of the Tet holiday, the 1st ARVN Division defenders would be at reduced strength. In addition, bad weather that traditionally accompanied the northeast monsoon season would hamper aerial resupply operations and impede close air support, which would otherwise have given the allied forces in Hue a considerable advantage.

The city's defense against the impending attack hinged in large part on the leadership of Brigadier General Ngo Quang Truong, commander of the 1st ARVN Division, regarded by many U.S. advisors as one of the best senior commanders in the

²³ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 29.

²⁴ Son, *The Viet Cong TET Offensive*, 459.

South Vietnamese armed forces.²⁵ A 1954 graduate of the Dalat Military Academy, he had earned his position through ability and combat leadership, not because of political influence or bribery, as was the case with many of his ARVN peers.

On the morning of January 30, the beginning of the Tet holiday, Truong received reports of enemy attacks on Da Nang, Nha Trang, Qui Nhon and other South Vietnamese installations during the previous night. Sensing that something was up, he gathered his division staff at the headquarters compound and put his troops on full alert. They were not pleased with cancellation of their holiday leave, but Truong's act prevented the capture of his headquarters and provided him with a base of operations to conduct the coming battle. Unfortunately, over half of his division was on holiday leave and absent from Hue. Believing that the Communists would not attack the "open" city directly, Truong positioned his available forces in defensive positions outside the urban area. When the Communist attack came, therefore, the only regular ARVN troops in the city were from the Hac Bao "Black Panther" reconnaissance company, which was guarding the Tay Loc airstrip in the northeastern corner of the Citadel.

Unknown to Truong as he made preparations for whatever was to occur; there was a clear indication that the NVA would attack Hue. On the same day that Truong put his staff on full alert, a U.S. Army radio intercept unit at Phu Bai overheard Communist orders calling for an imminent assault on Hue. Following standard procedure, the intercept unit forwarded the message through normal channels. Making its way through several command layers, the intercept and associated intelligence analysis did not make it

²⁵ George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 17. Captain George Smith was assigned to the ARVN 1st Infantry Division as an information advisor during the 25-day struggle. He details the South Vietnamese efforts to retain portions of the Citadel and the poorly coordinated effort to recapture Hue.

to the Hue defenders until the city was already under attack.²⁶ On the outskirts of the city, Lieutenant Nguyen Thi Tan's 1st ARVN Division Reconnaissance Company patrolled to the west of Hue. His soldiers observed two enemy battalions passing through their positions and immediately reported the contacts to the 1st ARVN Division headquarters.²⁷

Even as intelligence reports made their way slowly through channels, the Viet Cong had already infiltrated the city. Wearing civilian garb, Communist troops mingled with the throngs of people who had come to Hue for the Tet holiday. They easily transported weapons and ammunition into the city in wagons, truck beds, and other hiding places. In the early morning hours of January 31, the VC soldiers took up initial positions within the city and prepared to link up with the NVA and VC assault troops. At 3:40 a.m., the Communists launched an intense rocket and mortar barrage from the mountains to the west on both old and new sectors of the city. Following this barrage, the assault troops began the attack. The VC infiltrators donned their uniforms, met their comrades at the gates, and led them in the attack on key installations within the city. The 6th NVA Regiment, with two battalions of infantry and the 12th VC Sapper Battalion launched the main attack from the southwest and moved quickly across the Perfume River into the Citadel toward the ARVN 1st Division headquarters in the northeastern corner. The 800th and 802nd Battalions of the 6th NVA Regiment rapidly overran most of the Citadel, but Truong and his staff held the attackers off at the 1st ARVN Division compound, while the Hac Bao Company managed a tentative hold on its position at the

²⁶ James J. Wirtz, *The TET Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 98.

²⁷ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 28.

eastern end of the Tay Loc airfield. On several occasions, the 802nd Battalion came close to penetrating the division compound, so Truong ordered the Black Panthers to withdraw from the airfield to the compound to help strengthen his defenses. By daylight on January 31, the 6th NVA Regiment controlled the entire Citadel, including the Imperial Palace. The only exception was the 1st ARVN Division compound, which remained in South Vietnamese hands. The 802nd NVA Battalion breached the ARVN defenses on several occasions during the night, but each time the Black Panthers hurled them back.²⁸

The situation was not much better for U.S. forces south of the river in the new city. It could have been worse, but the North Vietnamese made a tactical error when they launched the initial assault on the MACV compound. Rather than attack immediately on the heels of the rocket and mortar barrage, they waited for approximately five minutes, which gave the defenders an opportunity to mount a quick defense.

The 804th Battalion of the 4th NVA Regiment twice assaulted the compound, but the allied defenders repelled their attackers each time by quickly assembling every man armed with individual weapons. Specialist 4th Class Frank Doezma operated an exposed machine gun position atop a twenty-foot wooden tower. His fire halted the first rush of North Vietnamese sappers who tried to advance toward the compound walls to set satchel charges, but he died from a B-40 rocket in an ensuing attack.²⁹ The NVA troops then stormed the compound gates where a group of Marines occupying a bunker met them.

The Marines held off the attackers for a brief period, but eventually the NVA defeated the defenders with several B-40 rockets. The Marines' sacrifice slowed the

²⁸ Headquarters, 1st Marine Regiment (Rein), 1st Marine Division (Rein), *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)* (San Francisco: Headquarters 1st Marine Regiment, 1968), 7.

²⁹ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 40.

North Vietnamese attack and gave the Americans and their Australian comrades' additional time to organize their defenses.³⁰ After an intense firefight, the Communists failed to take the compound, so they tried to reduce it with mortars and automatic weapons fire from overlooking buildings. The defenders sought cover and waited for reinforcements.

While the battle raged around the MACV compound, two VC battalions took over the Thua Thien Province headquarters, police station, and other government buildings south of the river. At the same time, the 810th NVA Battalion occupied blocking positions on the southern edge of the city along Highway 1 to prevent reinforcement from that direction. By dawn, the 4th NVA Regiment controlled all of Hue south of the river except the MACV Compound.

Thus, in very short order, the Communists seized control of virtually all of Hue. When the sun came up on the morning of January 31, nearly everyone in the city could see the gold-starred, blue-and-red National Liberation Front flag flying high over the Citadel. While the NVA and VC assault troops roamed the streets freely and consolidated their gains, political officers began a reign of terror by rounding up South Vietnamese and foreigners from prepared special target lists. VC officers marched through the Citadel, reading out the names on the lists through loudspeakers, telling them to report to the Government Delegate's office building. Those who responded never returned; their fate became known only after the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces recaptured the Citadel and found nearly 3,000 civilians massacred and buried in shallow mass graves.³¹

³⁰ William K. Nolan, *Battle for Hue* (California: Presidio Press, 1983), 7.

³¹ Son, *The Viet Cong TET Offensive*, 276.

As the battle erupted, other Communist forces struck in cities and towns from the DMZ to the Ca Mau Peninsula in the south. The North Vietnamese quickly established additional blocking positions to prevent Allied reinforcements from reaching the beleaguered defenders. The 806th NVA Battalion blocked Highway 1 northwest of Hue, while the 804th NVA and K4B Battalions took up positions in southern Hue. At the same time, the 810th NVA Battalion dug in along Highway 1 south of Hue. Allied leaders had their hands full all over the country and it proved difficult to assemble sufficient uncommitted combat power to oust the Communists. Additionally, the repositioning of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces to the west to support the action in and around Khe Sanh further reduced the number of troops available in the entire northern region. This situation had a major impact on the conduct of operations to retake Hue from the Communists.

Brigadier General Truong, who maintained a tenuous hold on his own headquarters compound, ordered his 3rd Regiment at PK17, reinforced with two airborne battalions and an armored cavalry troop, to fight its way into the Citadel from their positions northwest of the city. These forces encountered intense small arms and automatic weapons fire as they neared the Citadel and did not reach Truong's headquarters until late in the afternoon of the 31st.

As Truong tried to consolidate his forces, another call for reinforcements went out from the surrounded MACV compound inside the city. This plea for assistance was almost lost in all the confusion caused by the simultaneous attacks occurring across the I Corps Tactical Zone. Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of South Vietnamese forces in I Corps, and Lieutenant General Robert Cushman, III Marine

Amphibious Force (MAF) commander, were not sure what exactly was happening inside the city. The enemy strength and the scope of the Communist attack were less than clear during the early hours of the battle, but the allied commanders realized that reinforcements were necessary to expel the Communists from Hue. Accordingly, Cushman ordered Task Force X-Ray to send reinforcements into Hue to relieve the besieged MACV compound.

In response to III MAF directives, Brigadier General LaHue immediately directed Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (A/1-1), to move up Highway 1 from Phu Bai by truck to relieve the surrounded U.S. advisors. Rudely awakened from a much-needed slumber, Captain Gordon D. Batcheller told his company to prepare for a new mission. Given no real information, Batcheller remarked, “All I knew was ‘something was up.’”³² LaHue had no idea that almost an entire division had seized the city. The initial report of the attack on Truong’s headquarters and the MACV compound had led LaHue to believe that only a small enemy force had penetrated the city as part of a local diversionary attack, which is why he sent a lone company to contain the problem. Thus unaware of what awaited him, Batcheller ordered his A/1-1 Marines into several hastily acquired trucks and headed north along Highway 1, called “the Street Without Joy” because so many Frenchmen had died there in the past.³³

Enroute the column linked up with four M48 tanks from the 3rd Tank Battalion, 3rd Marine Division led by Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. LaMontagne. The combined convoy ran into sniper fire almost immediately and had to stop several times to clear buildings along their route of advance. When the convoy crossed the An Cuu Bridge that

³² Ibid., 11.

³³ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 10.

spanned the Phu Cam Canal into the southern part of the city, the Marines immediately received withering crossfire from enemy automatic weapons and B-40 rockets that seemed to come from every direction. The Marines advanced slowly against intense enemy resistance, but accurate machine gun fire pinned them between the river and the canal, just short of the MACV compound. Among the number of Marines wounded in the initial assault was Captain Batcheller, which forced Gunnery Sergeant J.L. Canley to assume command of the trapped company.

With his Company A pinned down, Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel, the battalion commander of 1/1 Marines, organized a hasty reaction force that included himself, his operations officer, some other officers from his battalion command group, and Company G, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (G/2-5), a unit from another battalion that had just arrived in Phu Bai earlier that day.³⁴ Gravel had never met Captain Charles L. Meadows, the Company G commander, and he later said that the only planning he had time to accomplish was to issue a terse order: “Get on the trucks!”³⁵

With little information other than that their fellow Marines were pinned down, the relief force moved along Highway 1, reinforced with two M42 Duster self-propelled twin-40mm anti-aircraft guns. The force met little resistance along the way and linked up with A/1-1 Marines, led by a slightly wounded Gunnery Sergeant Canley. With the aid of the four tanks and two Dusters from D Battery, 1-44 Artillery, the combined force fought its way to the MACV compound, breaking through to the beleaguered defenders at about 1515. The cost, however, was high: ten Marines killed and thirty wounded.

³⁴ Headquarters, 1st Marine Regiment (Rein), 1st Marine Division (Rein), *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)* (San Francisco: Headquarters 1st Marine Regiment, 1968), 11.

³⁵ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 14.

Having linked up with Colonel George Adkisson, MACV Advisory Team 3 commander, and the defenders of the MACV compound, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel received new orders from Brigadier General LaHue, directing him to cross the Perfume River with his wounded battalion and break through to the 1st ARVN Division headquarters in the Citadel. Gravel protested that his “battalion” consisted of only two companies, one of which was in bad shape, and that part of his force would remain behind to assist with the defense of the MACV compound. Nevertheless, LaHue, who still had not realized the full extent of the enemy situation in Hue, radioed back that Gravel was to “Proceed.”³⁶ This was the beginning of a series of intelligence failures by Task Force X-Ray. It took several days for General LaHue’s staff to determine the extent of the NVA resistance at a cost of dozens of Marines killed and many scores wounded. Sending Gravel’s battered force to contend with the much stronger NVA and VC forces north of the river would ultimately result in failure.

Leaving Company A/1-1 Marines behind to help with the defense of the MACV compound, Gravel took Company G/2-5 Marines, reinforced with three of the original M48 tanks and several others from the ARVN 7th Armored Cavalry Squadron, and moved out to comply with LaHue’s orders. Leaving the tanks on the southern bank to support by fire, Gravel and his Marines attempted to cross the Nguyen Hoang Bridge leading into the Citadel.

As the first infantry squad, led by Lance Corporal Barney Barnes, started across the bridge, it met with a withering hail of .51 caliber machine gun fire from a position at the north end of the bridge. With ten of his men down, Captain Meadows set up a

³⁶ Ibid., 19.

casualty collection point and directed the efforts to treat his fallen Marines. Lance Corporal Lester A. Tully rushed forward and destroyed the machine gun nest with a grenade. He later received the Silver Star for this heroic action and many Marines would in the days to follow as the fierce urban conflict produced frequent displays of individual heroism. Two platoons following Tully rushed over the bridge and established a hasty defensive perimeter, paralleling the river along the Citadel's southeast wall. They immediately came under heavy fire from AK47 assault rifles, heavy automatic weapons, B-40 rockets, and recoilless rifles from the walls of the Citadel. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel arrived at the north bank of the bridge only to find several seriously wounded Marines and NVA soldiers. Captain Meadows ordered his 1st platoon to continue forward along the outer wall but they instantly encountered accurate and lethal automatic weapons fire. Suffering additional casualties and no longer having the nerve to send his men into harm's way, Meadows gathered the remains of his shattered force and returned to the sliver of protection near the north wall of the Citadel.³⁷ His assessment to Gravel accurately reflected a well-entrenched and superior hostile force opposing the Marines.

Lieutenant Colonel Gravel determined that his "battalion" was greatly outnumbered and decided to withdraw without permission. His battalion having suffered significant casualties, Gravel called for vehicle support from Colonel Adkisson at the MACV compound to assist in evacuating his wounded, but the harried MACV advisor denied the request. Inadequate unity of command and fragile command and control relationship caused several needless casualties and wasted precious time that the 1/1 Marines needed to withdraw their wounded and dead. Gravel then set out on foot back

³⁷ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 90.

across the Nguyen Hoang Bridge, commandeered some abandoned Vietnamese civilian vehicles and used them as makeshift ambulances. After three hours of intense fighting, Company G/2-5 was able to pull back to the bridge and proceed to the safety of the MACV compound. By 7:00 p.m., the 1/1 Marines had established a defensive position near the MACV compound along a stretch of riverbank that included a park which they rapidly transformed into a helicopter landing zone to begin evacuating the wounded. The Marines' attempt to force their way across the bridge had been costly. Captain Meadows reported to Gravel the loss of 35 percent of his unit killed or wounded "going across that one bridge and then getting back across the bridge."³⁸ A late night medical evacuation (Medevac) attempt to remove some of the most seriously wounded Marines resulted in the helicopter crews' suffering four casualties of their own enroute to the makeshift Landing Zone (LZ) near the MACV compound. Gravel learned much in the days to follow, but nothing affected his thoughts more than how to save his Marines from another day of senseless destruction. One costly lesson from that night's action stood out clearly: "Never again did he send his men into an unsecured area by way of city streets, which the NVA obviously knew well enough to stake out." After that horrific night, Gravel always took a tank along to make new streets, right through buildings and walled compounds, "The method destroyed a lot of Hue, but it saved lives."³⁹

Intelligence reports from all over the I Corps Tactical Zone created a vague notion of an all-out offensive by the North Vietnamese; however, Task Force X-Ray staff's inability to piece together what was happening inside the walled fortress of Hue exacerbated the situation. Despite Gravel's detailed reports, Brigadier General LaHue

³⁸ Ibid., 90.

³⁹ Ibid., 91.

and his intelligence officers still did not possess sound appreciation of what was happening in Hue. “Task Force X-Ray was separated from Hue,” Keith Nolan aptly summed up, “by eight miles and a wall of optimism, disbelief and misinformation.” Remarks by General LaHue reflected the confusion at Marine headquarters. “Very definitely we control the south side of the city,” he said in an interview, “I don’t think they [i.e., the enemy] can sustain [the fight]. I know they can’t. I don’t think they have any resupply capabilities, and once they use up what they brought in, they’re finished.”⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the general was wrong on all counts. Besides the initial nine battalions sent into Hue early on January 31, an additional five battalions infiltrated into the city, increasing the NVA troop strength to over 6,000 regular with abundant supplies. NVA resupply continued unabated during the early days and was not interrupted until February 23. This repeated gross underestimation of enemy strength in Hue resulted in insufficient and piecemeal forces allocated to recapture the city.

With Brigadier General Truong and the 1st ARVN Division fully occupied in the Citadel north of the river, Lieutenant Generals Lam and Cushman discussed how to divide responsibility for the effort to retake Hue. They eventually agreed that ARVN units would be responsible for clearing Communist forces from the Citadel and the rest of Hue north of the river, while TF X-Ray would assume responsibility for the southern part of the city.⁴¹ The Task Force gave responsibility for its part of the city proper to the 1st Marine Regiment, and directed the 5th Marine Regiment secured areas outside the city. The haphazard command and control situation resulted in what would be, in effect, three

⁴⁰ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 27.

⁴¹ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 99.

separate and distinct battles raging to recapture Hue - one south of the river, one north of the river and one around the city.

In retaking Hue, Generals Lam and Cushman confronted a unique problem. The ancient capital was sacred to the Vietnamese people, particularly so to the Buddhists. The destruction of the city would result in political repercussions that neither the United States nor the government of South Vietnam could afford. As a result, General Lam imposed limitations on the use of artillery and close air support to minimize collateral damage.⁴² Eventually General Lam lifted the restrictions when the allied forces realized that both artillery and close air support were necessary to dislodge the enemy from the city. However, the initial rules of engagement played a critical role in the Marines' difficulties incurred in the early days of the battle.⁴³

Having worked out the division of effort to retake Hue, General Cushman began to send reinforcements into the Hue area in an attempt to separate Communist forces inside the city from outside assistance. Needing mobility and flexibility to interdict Communist infiltration and logistic routes, he ordered the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division to block enemy approaches into the city from the north and west. On February 3, the brigade airlifted the 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry (2/12 CAV) commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Dick Sweet, into a LZ about 10 kilometers northwest of Hue on Highway 1. The next days Sweet's cavalry troopers had moved cross country from the LZ and established a blocking position on a hill overlooking a valley about six kilometers

⁴² Murphy, *Semper Fi – Vietnam*, 195.

⁴³ Nicholas Warr, *Phase Line Green: The Battle for Hue, 1968* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 93.

west of the city. This position provided excellent observation of the main enemy routes into and out of Hue.⁴⁴

Simultaneously, the troopers of 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry (5/7 CAV) conducted search and clear operations along enemy routes west of Hue to destroy NVA and VC reinforcements and cut enemy resupply. On February 7, 5/7 CAV initiated contact with an entrenched North Vietnamese force and tried for the next 24 hours to expel the communists. The enemy held its position, however, and stymied the Cavalry advance with heavy volumes of automatic weapons and mortar fire.

On February 9, 3rd Brigade Headquarters ordered 5/7 CAV to fix the NVA forces in place, and directed 2/12 CAV to attack northward from its position. The latter ran into heavy resistance near the village of Thong Bon Ti, but continued to fight its way toward 5/7 CAV's position. For the next ten days, the two cavalry battalions fought the entrenched communists, who withstood repeated assaults. Despite the inability of the cavalry troopers to expel the North Vietnamese, these actions at least partially blocked the enemy's movement, inhibited his participation in the battle raging in Hue, and hampered his resupply efforts.⁴⁵

For almost three weeks, U.S. cavalry units tried to hold off the reinforcement of Hue by North Vietnamese troops from the NVA 24th, 29th, and 99th Regiments. Task Force X-Ray reinforced the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division on February 19 with the 2nd Battalion, 501st Infantry (2/501st) from the 101st Airborne Division. The battalion received the mission to seal access to the city from the south. That same day the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry (1/7 Cav) deployed south to the Hue area after being relieved from

⁴⁴ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 132-136.

⁴⁵ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 308-314.

its base defense mission at Camp Evans. While these U.S. Army units saw plenty of heavy action in the outlying areas and contributed greatly to the eventual allied victory at Hue, the fighting inside the city was to remain largely in the hands of South Vietnamese troops and U.S. Marines.⁴⁶

As allied reinforcements began their movement into the area, ARVN soldiers and U.S. Marines began preparing for counterattacks in their assigned areas. Making the task more difficult was the weather, which took a turn for the worse on February 2 when the temperature fell into the 50s and low clouds opened up with a cold, drenching rain. This had significant impact on use of close air support, aerial medevac, and observed fires for artillery support. The loss of these combat multipliers prior to the renewed assaults created undue risk for the Marines as they sought to clear Communist forces from the south side of Hue.⁴⁷

As the Marines tended their wounds and soothed their pride, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel reflected on their conduct. He realized that the last sustained urban fight U.S. Marines had occurred during the reconquest of Seoul in September 1950. Although he had served during the Korean War, he had not participated in that action. Captain Meadows, though trained in fighting in built-up areas as a young lieutenant early in 1960, had not experienced the ferocity of the NVA resistance in the heavily defended blocks of houses and streets in Hue. Both men realized that their Marines lacked the required training for the task that lay before them. No one in the battalion had ever fought in a built-up area; the Marine Corps had virtually eliminated urban combat tactics from its

⁴⁶ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 207-211.

⁴⁷ Headquarters, 1st Marine Regiment (Rein), 1st Marine Division (Rein), *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)*, 9.

wartime infantry-training program.⁴⁸ The lack of training forced the Marines at Hue to relearn in the heat of battle lost lessons of their esteemed past.

Ignoring his protests, TF X-Ray ordered Gravel's 1-1 Marines to seize the Thua Thien Province headquarters building and prison, six blocks west of the MACV compound. In the early morning hours of February 1, Gravel launched a two-company assault with the remnants of A/1-1 and G/2-5 supported by tanks, but the Marines immediately ran into trouble. "We didn't get a block away from the MACV compound when we started getting sniper fire," an M79 grenadier from Company G recalled. "We got a tank . . . [and] went a block, turned right and received 57mm recoilless which put out our tank." The attack was thus "stopped cold" and the battalion fell back to its original position near the MACV compound.⁴⁹ The M48 tanks did not have the impact that Gravel had hoped for; in fact, just the opposite occurred, as the tanks became magnets for B-40 rockets fired to suppress the attacking Marines. The Marines broke off the assault after advancing a single block towards their objective. Task Force X-Ray finally answered Gravel's pleas for assistance as the scope of the enemy's offensive became clearer.

By this time, General LaHue finally had realized that his intelligence officers had vastly underrated the strength of the Communists south of the river. He therefore gave Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, the new commander of the 1st Marine Regiment, overall tactical control of U.S. forces in the southern part of the city. Hughes quickly promised Gravel reinforcements and gave him the general mission of conducting "sweep and clear operations . . . to destroy enemy forces, protect U.S. Nationals and restore that southern

⁴⁸ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 97.

⁴⁹ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 176.

portion of the city to U.S. control.”⁵⁰ Earlier on February 3, 1-1 Marines had received operational control (OPCON) of Company F, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (F/2-5). Just the day prior, F/2-5 was fighting enemy forces with its parent battalion when it received word to pull from the 2/5 Marine defensive perimeter, truck to Phu Bai and prepare for helolift to Hue. Despite the protests of its commanding officer, Captain Michael Downs, F/2-5 moved to Hue with little knowledge of what was happening in Hue and what he was supposed to do upon arrival.

Reporting to Lieutenant Colonel Gravel, Downs learned that he was to relieve a MACV communications facility near the VC-surrounded U.S. consulate. The Marines launched their attack, fighting most of the afternoon. Though Company F/2-5 Marines had never fought in a town and the junior Marines lacked sufficient training to conduct house-to-house combat, the veteran leaders knew very well how to feel their way into hostile terrain. Despite their on-the-job training, F/2-5 Marines failed to reach the U.S. Army signal troops, losing three Marines killed and thirteen wounded in the process. Company F quickly learned “what the term mean streets really signifies.”⁵¹ During the early evening hours, Gravel received orders to conduct a night attack to reach the Thua Thien Provincial prison. When handed the task, Downs, in disbelief, pressed for further information about the enemy situation along the six blocks his company would have to transit, but received none. To make matters worse, he was restricted from using his organic mortars due to the rules of engagements limiting artillery support within the city and received only two M48 tanks. Concluding the mission was suicidal, Downs asked permission from Gravel for permission to transmit his views to TF X-Ray headquarters.

⁵⁰ *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)*, 1st Marine Regiment, 11.

⁵¹ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 107.

With Gravel's consent, he sent a blunt message explaining "that the prison was six blocks from MACV; that the NVA controlled all the streets on the southwest side of Highway 1; that G/2-5 and F/2-5 had been unable to fight their way a half block southwest of the highway in bloody, day-long attacks; and that no one at 1-1 or MACV even knew if there were any prisoners left in the prison."⁵² When headquarters received the message, it promptly cancelled the night attack. At that point, Gravel's exhausted marines established night defensive positions near the MACV compound in order to rest and resupply his battle weary "battalion." During the night, he made plans to renew the attack the next morning, but he was not to go alone, for reinforcements from Company H, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines (H/2-5) had closed in on the MACV compound as well.

The next day, February 2, the Marines made some headway with the new reinforcements. The 1/1 Marines finally relieved the MACV radio facility in the late morning hours, and after an intense three-hour fight, reached the Hue University campus. During the night, Communist sappers dropped the railroad bridge across the Perfume River west of the city, but left untouched the bridge across the Phu Cam Canal. By 11:00 a.m., Company H/2-5, commanded by Captain Ronald G. Christmas, had crossed the bridge over the Phu Cam canal in a convoy, accompanied by Army trucks equipped with quad .50 caliber machine guns and two M50A1 ONTOS. The Ontos were tracked vehicles armed with six 106mm recoilless rifles. As the convoy neared the MACV compound, it came under intense enemy heavy machine gun and B-40 rocket fire. Encouraged by the shouts from Captain Christmas, the convoy truck drivers floored their accelerators and raced to the MACV compound. The marines, raked by blistering enemy

⁵² Ibid., 113.

fire, returned fire aiming straight up at Communist soldiers leaning out windows to drop grenades onto the convoy.⁵³ Luckily, the Marine units took minimal casualties during their movement to the compound. H/2-5 Marines joined Gravel where the 1/1 Marines had established a position near the MACV compound. The NVA and VC gunners continued to pour machine gun and rocket fire into the positions occupied by Marines who, by day's end, had sustained thirty-six additional casualties, including two killed.⁵⁴

On the afternoon of February 3, Brigadier General LaHue ordered Colonel Hughes to move his command group into Hue, where he could more directly control the battle. Accompanying Hughes in the convoy that departed for the city was Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, commander of 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, who had been sitting frustrated in Phu Bai while three of his units – F, G, and H companies – fought in Hue under Lieutenant Colonel Gravel's control.⁵⁵ Hughes quickly established his command post in the MACV compound and took control of the situation. The forces at his disposal included Cheatham's three companies from 2-5 Marines and Gravel's depleted battalion consisting of Company A, 1-1 Marines and a provisional company consisting of one platoon of Company B, 1-1 Marines and several dozen cooks and clerks who had been sent to the front lines to fight.⁵⁶ He directed Gravel to secure the left flank with his one-and-a-half-company battalion to keep the main supply route open. He ordered Cheatham and his three reattached companies to assume responsibility for the attack south from the university toward the provincial headquarters, telling him to "attack through the city and clean the NVA out." When Cheatham hesitated waiting for

⁵³ Murphy, *Semper Fi – Vietnam*, 198.

⁵⁴ *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)*, 1st Marine Regiment, 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁶ Murphy, *Semper Fi – Vietnam*, 198-199.

additional guidance, the regimental commander, who, like everyone else going into Hue, had only the sketchiest information, gruffly stated, “if you’re looking for any more, you aren’t going to get it. Move out!”⁵⁷ Another version of guidance Cheatham received from Hughes was “to go dig the enemy out and to call on Regiment for any help he thought he needed.”⁵⁸ In essence, Hughes began to solve the command problems for the Marines while reassuring his subordinate commanders that he would support any method they felt necessary to conduct their assaults.

Cheatham’s plan called for his battalion to move west along the river from the MACV compound. He would attack with Companies F and H in the lead and Company G in reserve. Although the plan was simple, execution proved extremely difficult. From the MACV compound to the confluence of the Perfume River and the Phu Cam Canal was almost eleven blocks, each transformed by the enemy into a fortress that required clearance building-by-building and room-by-room.

The Marines began their attack toward the treasury building and post office, but they made very slow progress, not having yet devised workable tactics to deal with the demands of urban terrain. As they tried to advance with the support of tanks, the communists hit them with a withering array of mortar, rocket, machine gun, and small arms fire from prepared positions in the buildings. According to Cheatham, his Marines tried to take the treasury and postal buildings five or six different times.

The Marines just did not have enough men to deal with the enemy entrenched in the buildings. The frontage for a company was about one block; with two companies forward and one in reserve, this left an exposed left flank subject to enemy automatic

⁵⁷ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 179.

⁵⁸ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 137.

weapons and rocket fire. By the evening of February 3, the Marines had made little progress and were taking increasing casualties as they fought back and forth over the same ground. The following morning, Colonel Hughes met with his battalion commanders and ordered Cheatham to continue the attack. He told Gravel to continue to secure Cheatham's left flank with his battalion, which now had only one company left after the previous day's casualties. Before Gravel could move his Marines into position to screen Cheatham's attack, the 1-1 Marines had to secure the Joan of Arc School and Church. They immediately ran into heavy enemy fire that forced the untrained Marines to fight house-to-house. Eventually they secured the school, but continued to take accurate fire from NVA and VC machine gunners and snipers in the church. Reluctantly, Gravel gave the order to fire upon the church and the Marines pounded the building with mortars and 106mm recoilless rifle fire, eventually killing or driving off the enemy. In the ruins of the church, the Marines found two European priests, a Frenchman and a Belgian, who were livid that the Marines had fired on the church. Gravel was sorry for the destruction, but felt that he had had no choice in the matter.⁵⁹

With Gravel's 1/1 Marines moving into position to screen his left flank along the Phu Cam Canal, Cheatham's 2/5 Marines launched their attack at 0700 on February 4. It took 24 hours of bitter fighting just to reach the treasury building. Attacking the rear of the building after blasting holes through adjacent courtyard walls with 106mm recoilless rifle fire, the Marines finally took the facility, but only after plastering it with 90mm tank rounds, 106mm recoilless rifles, 81mm mortars, and finally CS gas, a riot-control agent.

⁵⁹ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 182.

In the rapidly deteriorating weather, the Marines found themselves in a room-by-room, building-by-building struggle to clear an eleven by nine block area just south of the river. This effort rapidly turned into a nightmare. Fighting in such close quarters against an entrenched enemy was decidedly different from the Marines' training and experience. Accustomed to fighting in the sparsely populated countryside of the Central Highlands of the I Tactical Corps Zone, nothing in their training prepared them for the type of warfare demanded by this urban setting.⁶⁰ Captain Christmas later remembered his apprehension as his unit prepared to enter the battle for Hue. "I could feel a knot developing in my stomach," he said. "Not so much from fear--though a helluva lot of fear was there--but because we were new to this type of situation. We were accustomed to jungles and open rice fields, and now we would be fighting in a city, like it was Europe during World War II. One of the beautiful things about the Marines is that they adapt quickly, but we were going to take a number of casualties learning some basic lessons in this experience."⁶¹

It was savage work -- house-to-house fighting through city streets--of a type largely unseen by Americans since World War II. Ground gained in the fighting measured in inches and each city block cost dearly with every alley, street corner, window, and garden paid for in blood. Correspondents who moved forward with the Marines reported the fighting as the most intense they had ever seen in South Vietnam.

The combat was relentless. Small groups of Marines moved doggedly from house to house, assaulting enemy positions with whatever supporting fire was available, blowing holes in walls with rocket launchers or recoilless rifles, then sending fire teams and squads into the breach. Each structure had to be cleared room-by-room using M-16

⁶⁰ *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)*, 1st Marine Regiment, 79.

⁶¹ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, A History* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 545.

rifles and grenades. Taking advantage of Hue's numerous courtyards and walled estates, the NVA and VC ambushed the Marines every step of the way. Having had no training in urban fighting, the Marines worked out the tactics and techniques on the spot.

One of the practical problems that the Marines encountered early was the lack of sufficiently detailed maps. Originally, their only references were standard 1:50,000-scale tactical maps that showed little of the city detail. Captain Meadows later remarked, "You have to raid the local Texaco station to get your street map. That's really what you need."⁶² Eventually, Lieutenant Colonels Cheatham and Gravel secured the necessary maps and numbered the government and municipal buildings and prominent city features. This permitted them to coordinate their efforts more closely and launch accurate fire support for their Marines.

Making the problem even more difficult was the initial prohibition on using artillery and close air support. The Marines had a vast arsenal of heavy weapons at their disposal: 105mm, 155mm, and eight-inch howitzers, helicopter gun ships, close air support from fighter-bombers, and naval gunfire from destroyers and cruisers with five-inch, six-inch, and eight-inch guns standing just offshore. However, because of the initial rules of engagement that sought to limit damage to the city, these resources were not available to the Marines at the beginning of the battle.

Even after Lieutenant General Lam lifted the ban on the use of fire support south of the river on February 3, the Marines could not depend on close air support or artillery because of the compact quarters and the low-lying cloud cover. Lieutenant Colonel Gravel later explained part of the difficulty. "Artillery in an area like that is not terribly

⁶² Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 72.

effective because you can't observe it well enough," he said. "You lose the rounds in the buildings, in the street . . . and you have a difficult time with perspective."⁶³

Additionally, the poor weather, which also greatly limited close air support, reduced the effectiveness of artillery fire because with low clouds and fog obscuring the flashes, the Marines had to adjust the rounds by sound.

The Marines had other firepower at their disposal. They used tanks to support their advance, but found they were unwieldy in close quarters and drew antitank fire nearly every time they advanced. They were much more enthusiastic about the ONTOS with its six 106mm recoilless rifles used very effectively in the direct fire mode to suppress enemy positions and to blow holes in the buildings. Despite their preference for the 106mm recoilless rifle, the Marines made use of every weapon at their disposal in order to dislodge the NVA and VC forces.⁶⁴

Progress was slow, methodical, and costly. On February 6, Captain Christmas' H/2-5 Marines took the Thua Thien province capitol building in a particularly bloody battle. Using two tanks and two ONTOS, the Marines advanced against intense automatic weapons fire, rockets, and mortars. Responding with the company's mortars and CS gas, the Marines finally overwhelmed the NVA defenders by mid-afternoon.

The province headquarters assumed a symbolic importance to both sides. A National Liberation Front flag had flown from the flagpole in front of the headquarters since the initial Communist takeover of the city. As a CBS television crew filmed the event, the Marines tore down the enemy ensign and raised the Stars and Stripes. This was a politically sensitive situation because the Marines should have turned over the

⁶³ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 185.

⁶⁴ *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)*, 1st Marine Regiment, 79-82.

provincial headquarters building to the ARVN and continued the fight. But Captain Christmas was determined. “We’ve been looking at that damn North Vietnamese flag all day, and now we’re going to take it down,” he told his gunnery sergeant.⁶⁵ To Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, this proved to be the turning point of the battle for Hue. “When we took the province headquarters, we broke their back,” he later explained. “That was a rough one.”⁶⁶

The provincial headquarters had served as the command post of the 4th NVA Regiment. With its loss, the integrity of the North Vietnamese defenses south of the river began to falter. The fighting was far from over, however, and the Marines expected the final push to be more difficult. Despite the rapid adaptation of the Marines to street fighting, it was not until February 11 that the 2/5 Marines reached the confluence of the river and the canal. Two days later, the Marines crossed into the western suburbs of Hue, aiming to link up with troopers of the 1st Cavalry and 101st Airborne Divisions, who were moving in toward the city. By February 11, most of the city south of the river was in American hands, but mopping up operations would take another twelve days as rockets and mortar rounds continued to fall and isolated snipers harassed Marine patrols. Control of the southern sector of the city returned to the South Vietnamese government. It had been very costly for the Marines, who sustained 38 dead and 320 wounded. It had been even more costly for the Communists: the bodies of over a thousand VC and NVA soldiers laid strewn about the city south of the river.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 237.

⁶⁶ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 161.

⁶⁷ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 191.

While the Marines fought for the southern part of the city, the battle north of the river continued to rage. Despite the efforts of U.S. units trying to seal off Hue from outside reinforcement, Communist troops and supplies made it into the city from the west and north, and even on boats coming down the river. On February 1, the 2nd ARVN Airborne Battalion and the 7th ARVN Cavalry had recaptured the Tay Loc airfield inside the Citadel, but only after suffering heavy casualties, including the death of the cavalry squadron commander and losing twelve armored personnel carriers.

Later that day, U.S. Marine helicopters brought part of the 4th Battalion, 2nd ARVN Regiment, from Dong Ha into the Citadel. Once on the ground, the ARVN attempted to advance, but were unable to make much headway in rooting out the North Vietnamese. By February 4, the ARVN advance north of the river had effectively stalled among the houses, alleys, and narrow streets adjacent to the Citadel wall to the northwest and southwest, leaving the Communists still in possession of the Imperial Palace and most of the surrounding area.⁶⁸

On the night of February 6-7, the NVA counterattacked and forced the ARVN troops to pull back to the Tay Loc airfield. Simultaneously, the North Vietnamese rushed additional reinforcements into the city. Brigadier General Truong responded by redeploying his forces and ordering the 3rd ARVN Regiment to move into the Citadel to take up positions around the division headquarters compound. By the evening of February 7, Truong's forces inside the Citadel included four airborne battalions, the Black Panther Company, two armored cavalry squadrons, the 3rd ARVN Regiment, the 4th Battalion, 2nd ARVN Regiment, and a company from the 1st ARVN Regiment.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 166-168.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 170-172.

Despite the ARVN buildup inside the Citadel, Truong's troops still failed to make any headway against the dug-in North Vietnamese, who had burrowed deeply into the walls and tightly packed buildings. All the while, NVA and VC forces seemed to be getting stronger as reinforcements moved into the city. With his troops stalled by relentless NVA fire, an embarrassed and frustrated Truong appealed to III MAF for help.⁷⁰

On February 10, Lieutenant General Cushman sent a message to Brigadier General LaHue directing him to move a Marine battalion to the Citadel. LaHue ordered Major Robert Thompson's 1st Battalion, 5th (1/5) Marines, to prepare for movement to Hue (see Map 5). The next day, helicopters lifted two platoons of Company B/1-5 Marines into the ARVN headquarters complex. Twenty-four hours later, Company A/1-5 Marines, with five tanks attached, plus the missing platoon from Company B/1-5 Marines, made the journey by landing craft across the river from the MACV compound, along the moat to the east of the Citadel and through a breach in the northeast wall. The next day Company C/1-5 Marines joined the rest of the battalion. Once inside the Citadel, the Marines relieved the 1st Vietnamese Airborne Task Force in the southeastern section. Sequentially, two battalions of Vietnamese Marines moved into the southwest corner of the Citadel with orders to sweep west. This buildup of allied forces inside the Citadel put intense pressure on the Communist forces, but they stood their ground and redoubled efforts to hold their positions.⁷¹

The following day, after conferring with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, Lieutenant General Lam authorized allied forces to use whatever weapons

⁷⁰ Ibid., 176. See also Murphy, *Semper Fi – Vietnam*, 207.

⁷¹ *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)*, 1st Marine Regiment, 36-37. See also Warr, *Phase Line Green*, 77-85.

were necessary to dislodge the enemy from the Citadel. Only the Imperial Palace remained off limits for artillery and close air support.

The mission of the 1/5 Marines was to advance down the east wall of the Citadel toward the river, with the Imperial Palace on their right. In the early morning hours of February 13, Company A moved out under a bone-chilling rain, following the wall toward a distinctive archway tower. Major Thompson expected to meet three ARVN battalions as his lead company began its attack; however, as they neared the wall tower, North Vietnamese troops opened up on the men with automatic weapons and rockets from concealed positions that they had dug into the base of the tower. The thick masonry of the construction protected the enemy defenders from all the fire brought to bear on them. Within minutes, several Marines lay dying and thirty more were wounded, including Captain John J. Bowe, Jr., the Company A commander. These troops, fresh from operations in Phu Loc, just north of the Hai Van Pass, were unfamiliar with both the situation and intense city street fighting.⁷²

The 1/5 Marines defined their environment as “surrounded by houses, gardens, stores, buildings two and three stories high, and paved roads littered with abandoned vehicles, the riflemen felt out of their element.”⁷³ The lack of experience in urban fighting caused many Marine casualties and forced the 1/5 Marines to adopt new techniques. Under heavy enemy fire, the Marines’ advance stalled; in the first assault on the south wall, the Marines lost fifteen killed and forty wounded. Major Thompson pulled Company A back and replaced them with Company C, flanked by Company B. Once again, heavy small arms, machine gun, and rocket fire that seemed to come from

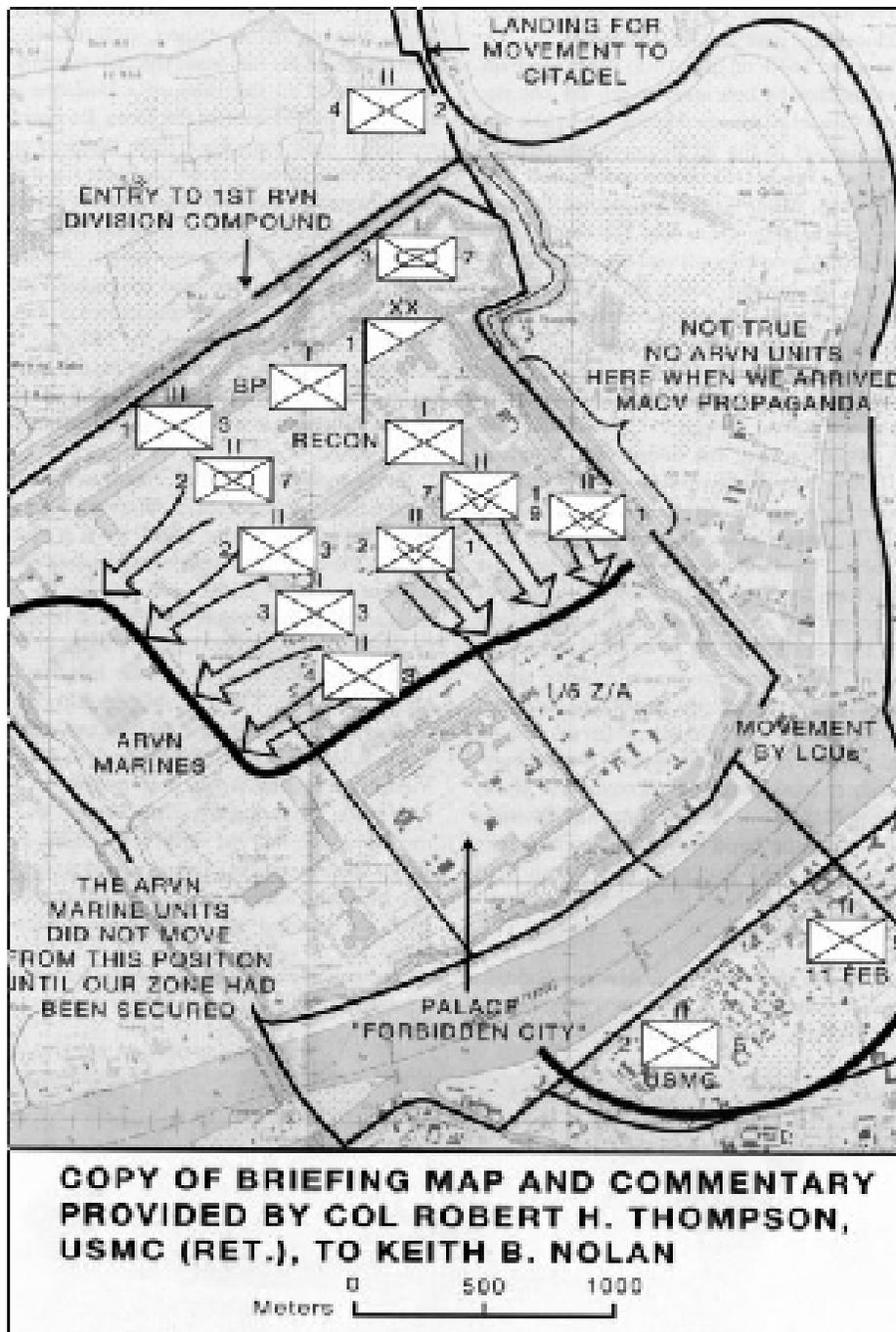
⁷² Warr, *Phase Line Green*, 100-102 and Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 185-186.

⁷³ Murphy, *Semper Fi – Vietnam*, 209.

every direction raked the Marines, but they managed to inch forward, using air strikes, naval gunfire, and artillery support. The fighting proved even more savage than the battle for the south bank. That night, Thompson requested artillery fire to help soften up the area for the next day's attack. He renewed the attack on the morning of February 14, but his Marines made little headway against the entrenched North Vietnamese and VC. It was not until the next day when Captain Myron C. Harrington brought Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (D/1-5) to the battle area by boat that the enemy in the wall tower capitulated, but only after six more Marines died and more than 50 wounded. That night, the NVA retook the tower for a brief period, but Harrington personally led the counterattack to return it to Allied control for good.

On the morning of February 16, Major Thompson's 1/5 Marines attacked southeast along the Citadel wall. From February 16-22, the battle raged back and forth while close air support, artillery, and heavy weapons fire pounded the Citadel to rubble. The bitter hand-to-hand fighting went on relentlessly. The Marines operated in a defender's paradise – row after row of single story, thick-walled masonry houses jammed close together up against a solid wall riddled with spider-holes and other enemy fighting positions. The Marines discovered that the North Vietnamese units in the Citadel employed “better city-fighting tactics, improved the already formidable defenses, dug trenches, built roadblocks and conducted counterattacks to regain redoubts which were important to. . . their defensive scheme.”⁷⁴ The young Marines charged into the buildings, throwing grenades before them, clearing one room at a time. It was a battle fought meter by meter, each enemy strongpoint reduced by fierce close-quarter fighting.

⁷⁴ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 201.



MAP 5 – INSERTION OF 1/5 MARINES INTO THE CITADEL⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 196.

No sooner was one position taken than the North Vietnamese opened up from another.

M48 tanks and ONTOS were available, but these tracked vehicles found it extremely difficult to maneuver in the narrow streets and tight alleys of the Citadel. At first, the 90mm tank guns were ineffective against the concrete and stone houses. The tank rounds often ricocheted off the thick walls back toward the Marines. The Marine tankers then switched to concrete-piercing fused shells that “resulted in excellent penetration and walls were breached with two to four rounds.”⁷⁶ From that point forward, the tanks proved invaluable in assisting the infantry assault. One Marine rifleman later stated, “If it had not been for the tanks, we could not have pushed through that section of the city. They [the North Vietnamese] seemed to have bunkers everywhere.”⁷⁷

Because of the intense fighting, block after block of the once beautiful Citadel laid in utter ruin. By the end of the battle, estimates tallied 10,000 houses either totally destroyed or damaged, roughly 40 percent of the city.⁷⁸ Many of the dead and wounded lay trapped in the rubble of homes and courtyards. Enemy troops killed by the Marines and South Vietnamese troops lay where they had fallen. “The bodies, bloated and vermin infested, attracted rats and stray dogs,” one of the MACV advisors later wrote. “So, because of public health concerns, details were formed to bury the bodies as quickly as possible.”⁷⁹ For those who fought in Hue, the memories of the stench and horrors of rotting corpses and festering rats live forever.

⁷⁶ *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)*, 1st Marine Regiment, 80.

⁷⁷ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 202.

⁷⁸ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 183.

⁷⁹ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 162.

By February 17, 1/5 Marines had suffered forty-seven killed and 240 wounded in just five days of fighting. Constantly under fire the entire time, the Marines, numb with fatigue, continued the fight despite having slept only in three- to four-hour snatches during the battle and most not stopping to eat. The fighting was so intense that the medics and doctors had a difficult time keeping up with the casualties. Because of the mounting casualties, most Marine replacements brought directly into the battle became casualties, many killed or wounded before their squad leaders could even learn their names. Some replacements arrived in Hue directly upon completion of infantry training at Camp Pendleton, California. The rapid rate of attrition was evident from the fact that there were Marines who died in battle while still wearing their stateside fatigues and boots.⁸⁰

On February 18, with what was left of his completely exhausted battalion nearly out of ammunition, Major Thompson chose to rest his troops in preparation for a renewal of the attack. They needed time to clean their weapons, resupply their ammunition, tend the walking wounded, and gird themselves for the next round of bitter fighting. The following morning, Thompson and his Marines attacked toward the Imperial Palace. They inched forward, paying dearly for every bit of ground taken. After another 24 hours of bitter fighting, they secured the north wall of the palace but had virtually spent themselves in doing so.⁸¹

As the U.S. Marines had fought their way slowly toward the Imperial Palace, the South Vietnamese Marine task force entered the battle. At 9:00 a.m. on February 14, the Vietnamese marines launched their attack from an area south of the 1st ARVN Division

⁸⁰ Murphy, *Semper Fi – Vietnam*, 213.

⁸¹ Warr, *Phase Line Green*, 179.

headquarters compound to the west. They were to make a left turning movement to take the southwest sector of the Citadel, but did not get that far because they immediately ran into heavy resistance from strong enemy forces as they engaged in intense house-to-house fighting. During the next two days, the South Vietnamese advanced fewer than 400 meters. To the north of the Vietnamese Marines, the 3rd ARVN Infantry Regiment in the northwest sector of the Citadel was having problems of its own and making little progress. On the 14th, enemy forces broke out of their salient west of the Tay Loc airfield and cut off the 1st Battalion, 3rd ARVN Regiment in the western corner of the Citadel. It would take two days for the ARVN to break the encirclement, and then only after bitter fighting and heavy casualties.⁸²

The NVA experienced problems as well. On the night of February 14, a U.S. Marine forward observer with ARVN troops inside the Citadel, monitoring enemy radio frequencies, learned that the NVA was planning a battalion-size attack with reinforcements through the west gate of the Citadel. He called in 155mm howitzers and all available naval gunfire on preplanned targets around the west gate and the moat bridge leading to it, later reporting that he had heard “screaming on the radio” monitoring the NVA net.⁸³ Subsequent intelligence, confirmed by additional radio intercepts, indicated that the artillery and naval gunfire had caught the North Vietnamese battalion coming across the moat bridge, killing a high-ranking North Vietnamese officer and a large number of fresh troops.

Shortly after this incident, U.S. intelligence determined that the NVA and VC were staging out of a base camp eighteen kilometers west of the city and that

⁸² Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 278.

⁸³ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 204-205.

reinforcements from that area were entering the Citadel using the west gate.

Additionally, intelligence identified a new enemy battalion west of the city and a new regimental headquarters with at least one battalion two kilometers north of the city.

Acting on this information, the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division ordered 2/12 CAV to launch coordinated assaults on the city from their blocking positions to the west. On February 21, 1st Cavalry troopers attacked and were able to seal off the western wall of the fortress, thus depriving the North Vietnamese of incoming supplies and reinforcements and precipitating a rapid deterioration of the enemy's strength inside the Citadel. The North Vietnamese were now fighting a rear guard action, but still fought for every inch of ground and continued to throw replacements into the fight.

As elements of the 1st CAV advanced toward Hue from the west and action continued in the Citadel, fire support coordination became a major concern. On February 21, Brigadier General Oscar E. Davis, one of the two assistant division commanders for the 1st Cavalry Division, flew into the Citadel to assume overall control of the situation in order to serve as the area's fire support coordinator. He established his headquarters alongside Brigadier General Truong in the 1st ARVN Division headquarters compound.⁸⁴

For the final assault on the Imperial Palace itself, a fresh unit, Captain John D. Niotis' Company L, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines airlifted into the Citadel. By February 22, the Communists held only the southwestern corner of the Citadel. Niotis led his Marines along the wall to breach the outer perimeter of the palace. Once inside, they faced devastating fire from the entrenched enemy, which forced them to pull back. While the

⁸⁴ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 140.

Marines prepared for the next assault on the Imperial City, Allied leaders decided that it would be politically expedient to have the Palace liberated by the South Vietnamese. Consequently, on the night of February 23-24, the 2nd Battalion, 3rd ARVN Regiment launched a surprise attack westward along the wall from the southeastern section of the Citadel. The North Vietnamese, initially caught off guard by the attack, recovered quickly and raked the advancing ARVN forces with lethal machine gun and small arms fire. A savage battle ensued but the South Vietnamese pressed the attack. The Communists, deprived of their supply centers to the west by the link-up between the 1st Cavalry Division and 2-5 Marines, fell back. Included in the ground gained by the South Vietnamese attack was the plot upon which stood the Citadel flagpole. At dawn on the 24th, the South Vietnamese flag replaced the National Liberation Front (NLF) banner that had flown from the Citadel flagpole for 25 days.⁸⁵ Later that day, the 1st ARVN Division reached the outer walls of the Citadel, where it linked up with elements of the 1st Cavalry Division. The VC and NVA troops abandoned their positions and fled westward to sanctuaries in Laos as the allied forces quickly overran the last Communist strongholds.

On March 2, 1968, General Cushman declared the Battle for Hue officially over. It had been a bitter ordeal. The relief of Hue was the longest sustained infantry battle the war had seen to that point. The losses were extremely high. In twenty-five days of combat, ARVN forces lost 384 killed and more than 1,800 wounded, plus thirty missing in action. The U.S. Marines suffered 147 dead and 857 wounded; for the U.S. Army, the figures were seventy-four dead and 507 wounded. The allies estimated that they killed over 5,000 Communists killed in the city and 3,000 in the surrounding area.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid., 172.

⁸⁶ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 258.

Although the Allied command tried to limit damage to the city by relying on extremely accurate 8-inch howitzer and naval gunfire, the house-to-house fighting took its toll, and much of the once beautiful city lay in rubble. The twenty-five days of fighting to retake Hue destroyed 40 percent of the city, and 116,000 civilians out of a pre-Tet population of 140,000 became homeless.⁸⁷ Aside from the battle damage, the civilian population suffered terrible losses from the communist attackers, officials reporting 5,800 civilians killed or missing. After the battle was over, South Vietnamese authorities discovered that Viet Cong death squads had systematically eliminated South Vietnamese government leaders and employees. They found nearly 3,000 corpses in mass graves surrounding the city – most shot, bludgeoned to death, or buried alive, almost all with their hands tied behind their backs.⁸⁸ The victims included soldiers, civil servants, merchants, clergymen, schoolteachers, intellectuals, and foreigners. Investigations revealed that the VC murdered many other missing South Vietnamese and NVA during the battle, or as Communist forces withdrew from the Citadel. The fighting had been intense and bloody, but in the end, the allies had ejected the Communists and recaptured the city.

The Battle for Hue remains worthy of further analysis in order to contemplate the complexities and requirements for urban combat operations. It was a bloody affair resulting in a severe casualty toll for various reasons, not the least of which were intelligence failures and lack of centralized command and control. It was only through the valor of individual Marines and soldiers, both American and South Vietnamese, that the allies prevailed against a determined enemy under combat conditions in an urban

⁸⁷ Shumlinson, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam*, 219.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

environment that far exceeded anything that any of them had previously experienced. Ironically, the victory at Hue proved irrelevant in the end. Despite the overwhelming tactical victory achieved by the allies in the city and on the other battlefields throughout South Vietnam, the Tet Offensive proved to be a strategic defeat for the United States. U.S. public opinion, affected in large part by the media coverage of the early days of the offensive, began to shift away from support for the war. On March 31, 1968, the full impact of the Tet offensive became clear when President Johnson announced a halt of all bombing of North Vietnam above the 20th parallel and gave notice that he would not seek reelection to a second term in the White House. The Communists won a great strategic victory; Plan *TCK-TKN* had achieved what General Giap set out to accomplish. In doing so, the NVA lost an estimated 30,000 fighters, and the Viet Cong would never recover. Nevertheless, the Tet Offensive resulted in a change in U.S. policy in Vietnam, and the United States soon began its long disengagement from the war.⁸⁹

Despite the outcome of the war, the Battle of Hue remains a classic study in urban warfare that clearly demonstrates not only the rigors and demands of fighting in a built-up area, but also the valor and fortitude demanded of the soldiers who are to fight in such situations. The U.S. Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers retook the city from the Communists and paid for their effort in blood; many of the lessons they learned the hard way are just as valid for urban fighting today as they were in 1968.

⁸⁹ Don Oberdorfer, *Tet* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 323.

CHAPTER 3

LESSONS LEARNED

The Marines of the Chosin Reservoir, of Hue City, and of countless other battles through the years did not wait to be reminded of their individual responsibilities. They behaved as Marines always have, and as we expect today's Marines and those of the future to behave – with courage, aggressiveness, and with resolve. The future battlefields on which Marines fight will be increasingly hostile, lethal, and chaotic. Our success will hinge, as it always has, on the leadership of our junior Marines. We must ensure that they are prepared to lead. - General Charles C. Krulak, USMC (Ret.)⁹⁰

The Battle for Hue remains one of the best battlefields to examine the challenges and complexities of urban operations. Combat operations in and around Hue highlight several weaknesses in the preparation of U.S. armed forces for urban combat. This study reveals some of the more difficult challenges faced by American armed forces during the battle, most of which remain a challenge today as well. The key factors that contributed to the challenges faced include intelligence and situational understanding, fighting in built-up areas (FIBUA) training, use of enabling systems and combat multipliers, logistical resupply, casualty evacuation and medical support, command and control, rules of engagement, and refugee control.

Lack of intelligence played a crucial role in the initial developments and course of action taken to recapture Hue. As the battle unfolded, there were several key indicators throughout South Vietnam that pointed toward an all-out effort by the North Vietnamese army. The first came in September 1967 when Robert Brewer, senior U.S. intelligence advisor assigned to Quang Tri Provincial Headquarters, uncovered a Communist agent

⁹⁰ Charles C. Krulak, General (Retired), "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Magazine*, January 1999, 8.

and doubled him back onto his superiors.⁹¹ Intelligence reports analyzed throughout the autumn of 1967 showed numerous indicators that North Vietnam planned a significant change in the conduct of the war. The evaluation of the data pointed to nationwide attacks on cities throughout South Vietnam; however, U.S. military intelligence discounted the possibility that North Vietnam was willing to pay the high cost in men and equipment to launch such an attack. Don Oberdorfer quotes a military intelligence officer, “if we’d gotten the whole battle plan, it wouldn’t have been believed. It wouldn’t have been credible to us.”⁹² Clearly, the intelligence system completely failed to believe all the evidence pointing to nationwide attacks as imminent. At the tactical level around Hue, several reports days prior to the attack revealed the North Vietnamese intentions. Even when there were attack signals, movement of NVA units, supplies, and equipment and an uncovered supply base six kilometers west of Hue, the 1st Marine Division headquarters at Phu Bai remain unconvinced that an attack on the Hue city proper was imminent. The data was enough for General LaHue to deploy patrols around the city. Unfortunately, NVA sappers and infantry had already infiltrated the city during pre-Tet holiday preparations. Brigadier General Truong made a wise assessment from reports of January 29 and recalled his 1st ARVN division staff and cancelled holiday leaves, but this proved too little and too late. Once the attack was launched, the volume and variety of reports prevented the careful analysis necessary to gain an appreciation of the attack’s scale. The intelligence system failed to provide the Marines with a situational understanding of the enemy’s strength and intentions.

⁹¹ Eric Hammel, *Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, 1968* (California: Pacifica Press, 1991), 2.

⁹² Don Oberdorfer, *Tet* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 121.

The first Marine reinforcements deploying to Hue did not receive the initial intelligence reports, a lapse that resulted in numerous casualties of unprepared Marines. Captain Batcheller, Company A/1-1 Marines, had only sketchy details of enemy activity when he received the mission on January 31 of linking up with MACV headquarters. As the A/1-1 Marines approached Hue from Phu Bai, they learned from members of a Marine Combat Action Patrol (CAP) “that local Vietnamese had reported numerous enemy units moving in a northerly direction. The CAP was unable to confirm the “civilian reports about beaucoup VC.”⁹³ When Batcheller’s unit moved into southern Hue, the enemy attacked from every direction and the Marines immediately took substantial casualties which affected their ability to link-up with the MACV headquarters. Company G/ 2-5 Marines, commanded by Captain Chuck Meadows, attached to 1/1 Marines, was ordered to move into Hue and link up with the 1st ARVN Division Command Post (CP) in the Citadel and escort Brigadier General Truong back to Phu Bai. Meadows, thinking it was to be a routine mission, told his men to leave their packs behind. That order had significant consequences later when the G/2-5 Marines remained in Hue for the duration of the fight without necessary individual equipment. The lack of intelligence proved deadly time and again for the Marines during the first days of the fighting. It degraded their effectiveness to join in the counterattack on Hue since they were unclear as to the enemy’s strength in the city. Allied commanders, not knowing the enemy’s disposition, reinforced the beleaguered defenders gradually, increasing the number of casualties inflicted by numerically superior and entrenched NVA soldiers.

⁹³ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 62.

The intelligence failure inhibited the allies' ability to conduct target analysis. Knowledge of the enemy's strength and locations are crucial to effective plan development and fire support. Captain Meadows, during his assault, did not even have a map of the city. During his company's movement toward the MACV compound, he stumbled into a Texaco gas station where he found tourist maps with all the major buildings listed and numbered. The crude but effective map provided the allied forces a means to coordinate their attacks, to analyze intelligence reports and match which buildings the NVA forces occupied, and commence their assaults.⁹⁴ Simple intelligence failures like these caused a disjointed effort to recapture the city.

U.S. forces at Hue lacked adequate training in what doctrine at the time labeled "Fighting in Built-Up Areas (FIBUA)." Stateside training of new recruits came from the drill instructors' experiences in the jungles of Vietnam, and the veterans at Hue also had seen combat only in jungles or rice paddies. As a result, the Marines assaulting Hue on January 31 faced an entirely new situation and during the first three days of combat underwent fast on-the-job training in the art of house-to-house fighting. They learned through trial and error often resulting in numerous casualties. The Marines devised ways to destroy an entrenched enemy who had ample time to prepare fortified positions with interlocking fires of machine guns. The lack of training was so prevalent that Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, 2-5 Marines battalion commander, had to dig through the 5th Marines Regimental headquarters to find manuals on combat in built-up areas. The two manuals he found, *Combat in Built-Up Areas* and *Attack on a Fortified Position* highlighted what would become the Marines' assault plan. It boiled down to the best way to fight through

⁹⁴ Ibid., 72.

a city was to gas the enemy, blow things up, and then clear out the ruins.⁹⁵ The Marines experimented with various techniques but the preferred method to clear a building in the house-to-house fighting that ensued was with an eight-man team. Four men covered the exits of a building while the other four conducted the assault. The assault force blasted a hole through a wall, window, or door, tossed in CS and/or fragmentation grenades and then cleared the room or building. The outside force killed any NVA or VC forces trying to escape. After successful clearance, the team would swap responsibilities and move to the next building. “We hope to kill them inside or flush them out the back for the four men watching the exits,” Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham explained. “Then, taking the next building, two other men rush the front. It sounds simple but the timing has to be just as good as a football play.”⁹⁶ On February 3, Cheatham used this method to clear southern Hue with Companies F and H, 2-5 Marines. Each company assigned a platoon to suppress a target building, while a second platoon launched the assault. A third platoon remained in reserve to assist when needed.⁹⁷ Although the tactics were primitive, they were effective. This methodical approach to rooting out an entrenched enemy caused devastating damage or destruction to almost every building in Hue by the battle’s end.

Tied to these tactics used to clear out buildings were the enabling systems and combat multipliers. The Marines quickly learned that heavy weapons such as tanks, recoilless rifles, Light Anti-Armor Weapons (LAAW), and 3.5 inch rocket launchers were absolutely essential to create the shock effect and punching capacity needed to fire

⁹⁵ Ibid., 134.

⁹⁶ George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 141-142.

⁹⁷ Edward F. Murphy, *Semper Fi Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), 199.

and maneuver on the city streets. Going through other buildings often required heavy weapons to blast their way through to facilitate the assault and seize target buildings and objectives. The Marines used a variety of man-portable rocket launchers to blast through buildings and rooms. They scrounged up World War II vintage 3.5-inch bazookas and M72 LAAWs to knock holes into walls or destroy bunkers.⁹⁸ The Marines 3rd Tank Battalion's M48 main battle tanks proved a highly effective support platform to punch gaps into compound walls, destroy bunkers, and provide cover for Marines. The 106mm recoilless rifles, either mounted on the tracked M50A1 Ontos or the dismounted, crew-served variant, proved indispensable in house-to-house fighting. These heavy weapons were also extremely useful for providing suppressive fire and as counter-sniper weapons protecting Marines from devastating sniper fire from concealed NVA.

Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham ordered his men to search for any weapon that would facilitate the urban fight he envisioned. Even obsolescent weapons were unearthed, such as his battalion's flame-throwers, which proved useful in burning out bunkers and sniper positions, and in clearing rooms.⁹⁹ His men took rucksacks full of C4 plastic explosives that were invaluable for destroying doors, bunkers and whole buildings. His intent was to use everything in the Marines' arsenal to maximum their options to excavate NVA soldiers while minimizing his own casualties.

The Marines used riot control agents, such as smoke and tear gas, as effective weapons to force enemy troops from buildings, their bunkers and spider holes. Thinking of what he had read, Cheatham ordered his men to take every available gas mask from Phu Bai because he knew they would be necessary to root out the enemy. During the

⁹⁸ *Command Chronology* (San Francisco: Headquarters, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1968), 13.

⁹⁹ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 135.

assault on the treasury building in southern Hue by 2/5 Marines, they had tried using smoke grenades, but this proved ineffective due to stiff winds blowing off the Perfume River. Major Ralph Salvati, executive officer of 2/5 Marines, recalled seeing E8 CS launchers stacked against the wall of the MACV compound. The two-foot high launcher could hurl as many as sixty-four 35mm tear gas capsules up to 250 meters. The E8 launcher could blanket an entire area so that the gas would saturate every room and bunker. The NVA soldiers, fighting without masks, were forced to surface and then cut down by the waiting Marines.¹⁰⁰ The Marines used the CS launcher with great effect throughout the remainder of the battle.

Smoke also proved useful in identifying NVA positions and to cover the Marines' movements. Captain Ron Christmas, commander of Company H, 2-5 Marines, noticed that the Communist troops would open fire when they saw smoke on the assumption that Marines were shifting positions. "Our reaction was to throw smoke grenades into the street to draw fire," he later wrote. "We then pinpointed the fire and used our direct fire weapons to suppress the enemy's fire. We usually moved under the cover of the smoke and dust caused by the direct fire weapons."¹⁰¹

Logistical resupply became a critical factor in the Marines' success to recapture Hue. In the initial reinforcement of the city, many Marines went in thinking they would be home that evening after a quick mission and so left most of their supplies and ammunition back at the 1st Marine Division base at Phu Bai. As the battle progressed in the first seventy-two hours, the Marines quickly realized that this was to be a drawn-out

¹⁰⁰ William K. Nolan, *Battle for Hue* (California: Presidio Press, 1983), 51.

¹⁰¹ George R. Christmas, "A Company Commander Reflects on Operation Hue City," *Marine Corps Gazette*, April 1971, 36.

battle that would require vast amounts of ammunition. Until February 4 they received all supplies via truck convoy and helicopter from Phu Bai, but then NVA sappers destroyed the An Tu Bridge over the Perfume River. This forced the Marines to use the Landing Craft, Utility (LCU) ramp at Hue City to get supplies forward to the troops.

The quickest yet more dangerous way to resupply was via helicopter. During the first several days of the battle, resupply by air was sporadic at best due to weather conditions, so the majority of supplies for the 1st Marine Regiment came by LCU. As weather conditions improved, heliborne logistical support was exceptional. The Marines ferried in ammunition and food then removed their most critically wounded to hospitals established at Phu Bai. They learned that helicopter logistical support proved to be the crucial factor that facilitated continuous operations in Hue.¹⁰²

At the tactical level, resupply proved very difficult. The expenditure rate of small arms ammunition especially 5.56mm rounds for the M-16 rifle, 60mm and 81mm mortar rounds, 7.62mm linked rounds for the M60 machine gun, was ten times the normal rate of expenditure. Supplies had to be ferried from the Logistical Support Area (LSA) established at the LCU ramp to the Marines fighting in and around Hue via air. The Marines established small Landing Zones (LZ) to quickly bring in supplies and remove their wounded. Since there were limited trucks to haul ammunition around southern half of Hue, most ammunition delivered arrived on heavy weapon platforms to platoon and company command posts and then redistributed to the individual Marines. This proved dangerous since it exposed these logistic convoys to devastating enemy B-40 rocket fire.

¹⁰² *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY), 1st Marine Regiment, 74.*

Once the Marines secured the buildings and areas around the LCU ramp and MACV compound, supplies moved to the forward companies for distribution.¹⁰³ Although resupply was difficult, there were very few shortages because of the constant logistical flow from DaNang to Hue.

The nature and intensity of the house-to-house fighting produced an enormous amount of casualties in a short amount of time. Due to inclement weather and therefore reduced aerial operations, it became apparent that forward medical facilities were required. Each battalion established its forward aid stations within its area of operations to provide immediate emergency care and assess evacuation requirements. The 1st Marine Regiment established a regimental aid station at the MACV compound with eight medical officer and medics. The function of the forward regimental aid station was to “(1) provide definitive emergency care and resuscitation of casualties, (2) provide control and coordination of all casualty evacuations, (3) provide a clearing house for the killed-in-actions (KIAs) in order to establish definite identification as soon as possible, and (4) to serve as the Battalion Aid Station (BAS) for 1-1 Marines, who did not establish a forward BAS.”¹⁰⁴ Aid stations were within two to three minutes of the forward edge of combat. Navy and Marine corpsmen and Army medics displayed valorous heroism to save the lives of their fallen comrades. Under what was often intense enemy fire, medical personnel treated and evacuated Marines right at the front line of combat, which proved to be the difference in the life and death for many of the wounded. The Marines used trucks, mechanical mules, and any available transportation to carry the wounded back to the aid stations. From there, Marine and Army helicopters evacuated the

¹⁰³ *Command Chronology* (San Francisco: Headquarters, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, 1968), 1-II-7.

¹⁰⁴ *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)*, 1st Marine Regiment, 77.

critically wounded to hospitals at Phu Bai or on hospital ships, if warranted. During the Battle for Hue, if a Marine reached an aid station alive, his chances of survival were nearly 100 percent.¹⁰⁵

Command and control raised a number of challenges for the Allied forces right from the beginning of the battle. The lack of an overall commander for the battle facilitated a disjointed effort to recapture Hue. On the evening of January 31, Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, I ARVN Corps commander and Lieutenant General Robert Cushman, III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) commander, conferred to work out operations in and around Hue. They agreed that Communist forces to defeat the Communist forces by separate but broadly coordinated effort by their local subordinate commands, Brigadier General Truong's 1st ARVN Division and Brigadier General Foster LaHue's Task Force (TF) X-Ray.¹⁰⁶ The boundary between the two commands was the Perfume River, with the 1st ARVN Division responsible for clearing Communist forces north of the river including the Citadel and TF X-Ray responsible south of the river focused on the "New City." The separate efforts between the ARVN and U.S. Marines led to a lack of coordination and unity of effort that hampered city's recapture. This command arrangement remained in effect throughout most of the battle. U.S. Marines reported to TF X-Ray at Phu Bai; ARVN forces received their orders from General Truong's 1st ARVN headquarters, and U.S. Army forces reported to Major General Jack Colson's 1st Cavalry Division. These forces conducted three simultaneous but separate operations to relieve Hue in complete isolation from each other. On February 21, Brigadier General Oscar E. Davis assumed overall command of U.S. forces fighting in

¹⁰⁵ *Combat Operations After Action Report (Operation HUE CITY)*, 1st Marine Regiment, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 92.

Hue. His dual mission was to coordinate allied efforts and serve as fire support coordinator; however, most of the fighting was over except for that surrounding the Imperial Palace.¹⁰⁷ The lack of an overall commander at the outset to plan, coordinate, and execute the allies' response negated unity of effort and caused significant problems with command and control and deconfliction of unit attacks.

Without an overall tactical commander, no one was responsible for the conduct of the battle. There was no one to develop an overall strategy, establish priorities of effort, deconflict fire support requests for artillery and close air support, coordinate logistical support, or hold accountable should the operation prove a disaster. U.S. forces scrambled to take care of their own separate force, Marines and soldiers, while ARVN forces received nothing from the U.S. commands and virtually no support from their own. The command relationship almost guaranteed difficulty in achieving any meaningful unity of effort.

The command and control situation created other challenges as well. Coordination to isolate the city from outside Communist reinforcement proved difficult while the Marines and ARVN forces cleared Hue City proper. The Communists' plan called for the isolation of the city so they could have unimpeded resupply and reinforcement routes into and out of Hue. They were able to replenish their ranks even as the fighting intensified and after they began to take increasing numbers of casualties. ARVN and U.S. headquarters realized too late the scale of Communist operations around Hue and not until February 3 did they send significant allied forces to isolate and destroy Communist troops protecting infiltration routes and approaches into Hue. When the

¹⁰⁷ Smith, *The Siege at Hue*, 228.

elements of the 1st Cavalry Division and 101st Airborne Division effectively sealed the city from the northwest to the south of Hue on February 21, it had a decisive impact on the battle inside the city.¹⁰⁸ There was a significant decrease in NVA effort once the 1st Cavalry Division and Marines cut all supply routes; the battle was over within a week. The allied force might have achieved this earlier had there been a single commander to synchronize better the efforts of the units outside the city with those fighting inside the city.

Artillery and close air support to assist ground forces played a critical role in the outcome of the battle. Hampered by inclement weather and stifling rules of engagement, the Marines had to develop techniques to root out an entrenched enemy in a heavy urban environment without the artillery and CAS that they were so accustomed to having at their disposal. The rules of engagement initially agreed upon by Generals Lam and Cushman limited the use of artillery and close air support to minimize the damage to the historic and symbolic city. When Gravel sent Company G/2-5 Marines to link up with the 1st ARVN Division Command Post (CP) in the Citadel, they could not use their mortars or receive artillery support. Company G crossed the Nguyen Hoang Bridge under continuous fire from the ramparts of the Citadel walls by well-placed NVA machine gun fire. Artillery and CAS could have suppressed enemy fire while the Marines conducted the assault. The Marines had five men killed and forty-five wounded, almost 35 percent of the company.¹⁰⁹ On February 11, while Gravel was establishing his battalion command post and his soldiers were participating in a Mass service, the NVA rained 120mm rockets into the Citadel. The rockets fell short and landed on the

¹⁰⁸ Hammel, *Fire in the Streets*, 333.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

archbishop's seminary where Vietnamese children sought shelter. As Gravel supervised the evacuation of twenty dead and forty injured children, he thought, "Charlie didn't have Rules of Engagement. They didn't care whom they killed."¹¹⁰ The Marines continued to suffer numerous casualties clearing the NVA from house-to-house. Lack of artillery and close air support made it extremely difficult, particularly during the early days of the battle, for the Marines to dig the North Vietnamese out of prepared positions inside the city. Lieutenant General Lam lifted these restrictions on February 13 when Allied headquarters argued successfully that adhering to that standing order was causing unacceptable casualties. ARVN and U.S. forces inside the Citadel were very pleased with the easing of the fire support restrictions. A determined enemy engaged the Marines and ARVN forces continuously and the impact of fire support enabled them to dig out the entrenched Communist soldiers. Nicholas Warr, a platoon leader in Charlie Company, 1-5 Marines, inserted into the Citadel on February 12 during the Battle for Hue, later wrote, ". . . These damnable rules of engagement . . . prevented American fighting men from using the only tactical assets that gave us an advantage during firefights--that of our vastly superior firepower represented by air strikes, artillery and naval gunfire--these orders continued to remain in force and hinder, wound and kill 1/5 Marines until the fourth day of fighting inside the Citadel of Hue."¹¹¹

Due to initial restrictions on artillery and air strikes and the fact that most of the available artillery from Phu Bai was directed at interdicting enemy escape routes around the city, the Marines relied on company-level 60mm and 81mm mortars for close-in fire

¹¹⁰ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 93.

¹¹¹ Nicholas Warr, *Phase Line Green: The Battle for Hue, 1968* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 124.

support. They developed several techniques with the mortars to offset the loss of heavier artillery. Marines directed mortar fire onto building rooftops to cause them to collapse onto NVA soldiers below. The Marines used mortars to protect their movements. By dropping white phosphorous rounds to obscure their maneuver followed by high explosive rounds to ensure NVA forces remained suppressed, the Marines could navigate across streets and in between buildings without risk of casualties. The mortars proved useful against enemy soldiers fleeing from buildings assaulted by the Marines. By pre-registering on both the objective building and the street to that building's rear, the Marines were able to inflict heavy casualties by shifting fire from the objective to the rear street as they pushed the enemy soldiers out of the building.¹¹²

The fierce fighting within Hue trapped almost 140,000 people in the between two forces. Refugee control quickly became a significant challenge as citizens either fled or cowered in their homes. Captain Christmas, Company H, 2-5 Marines explained there were three areas on refugee control that require consideration, "First is the intelligence which can be gained from these refugees. Second is the interference of these folks when you are in the attack; and, finally, enemy infiltration within their ranks."¹¹³ Building after building cleared found civilians hiding from NVA soldiers. NVA plans called for VC cadre to gather South Vietnamese citizens who worked for or supported the South Vietnamese government. These teams roamed throughout the city streets, snatching government employees, doctors, teachers, lawyers, and supporters and either evacuating them from the city for "reeducation" or executed them after extensive interrogations. Hue citizens witnessing the carnage hid in their homes fearful for their

¹¹² Christmas, "A Company Commander Reflects," 38.

¹¹³ Ibid., 38.

lives, awaiting rescue by ARVN or US forces. Every turn in the fighting flushed out hundreds of Vietnamese civilians of every age. Whole families were able to survive the shelling and street warfare by taking refuge in small bunkers constructed in their homes. The Marines exacerbated the problem of refugee control over the next weeks as they liberated the city. The huge influx of refugees created a logistical and security nightmare for U.S. and ARVN forces in Hue. The Marines quickly developed techniques to question the civilians, gaining detailed intelligence of NVA activity and locations. During assaults on homes, Marines constantly encountered civilians, sometimes with devastating consequences. Once the Marines cleared a block of homes and buildings and established a safe corridor, they escorted their Vietnamese charges safely to collection points. Providing for thousands of refugees, however, sapped the logistical system. Most of the refugees were innocent civilians, but some were enemy soldiers or sympathizers-- and many were ARVN troops trapped at home on leave for the Tet holidays. All of the ARVN soldiers who were fit for duty helped the Marines and MACV advisors with the refugees. The Allies had to do something about the growing flood of refugees and displaced persons as the battle raged.

One of the many tasks performed by the 1st Marine Regiment was to establish city services. The Regimental S-5, Civil Affairs Officer, set up refugee centers on both sides of the Perfume River to shelter, feed and treat the influx of displaced civilians. They distributed food to each center with very little problem. Once the Marines captured the hospital, Colonel Stan Hughes, Commander of the 1st Marine Regiment, ordered it cleaned and reopened to handle the enormous civilian casualties. The Allied forces began the task of burying the dead to prevent the spread of disease. They assisted the city

government to restore water and power.¹¹⁴ With the assistance of the local Catholic hierarchy and American resources and personnel, the South Vietnamese government officials tried to restore order and normalcy in the city. By the end of February, a full-time refugee administrator was in place, and the local government slowly began to function once more.

There are many more lessons learned from this battle that have earned a place in U.S. Marine Corps and Army doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures, unit standard operating procedures (SOPs) that are not accounted for in this study. Recent Joint doctrine highlight Hue as a sterling example of the urban triad of physical terrain, noncombatant population and service infrastructure systems that operational and tactical commanders must address as part of urban operations.¹¹⁵ Urban operations are multi-dimensional problems of interior, exterior, vertical, surface and subsurface that tactical leaders need to examine to devise attack and defensive options. Deliberate urban operations require a balance of speed with security, multiple points of entry while minimizing collateral damage, and ensuring a large reserve that permits continuous and flexible operations. Deliberate operations are characterized by precision attack with direct and indirect fires, aviation, and stand-off capabilities from multiple axes, simultaneously maintaining secure lines of communications to evacuate or move noncombatants and sustain operations. Leaders and planners must account for the human dimension and its influence in every aspect of urban operations. Tactical commanders must ascertain what the impact of their operations will be on the environment; in other

¹¹⁴ *Command Chronology*, 1st Marine Regiment, II-F-1.

¹¹⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Publication 3-06, Doctrine for Joint Urban Operations* (Washington DC: The Joint Staff, 2002), I-2.

words, they must deal with issues such as disease, hazard material threats, criminal threats, and public opinion.¹¹⁶ U.S. armed forces must continue to examine these lessons faced by the allies during their assault on Hue. The key factors discussed are the subject of much debate in the Combat Developments community of the U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army. Continued study of this battle should yield new insights into what U.S. armed forces may face in the future.

¹¹⁶ Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-06, Urban Operations* (Washington DC: GPO, 2002), 5-1-32.

CHAPTER 4

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

You'll go to war the way you are today...not the way you want to be. Regardless of your shortages in personnel, the time that you have available to train, or the resources that you have on hand, you've got to get on with it. – Brigadier General David Grange¹¹⁷

The Battle for Hue offers a unique prism for viewing emerging doctrine for urban operations. Since this battle, the world has changed dramatically, with a phenomenal growth of urban areas. Many of these cities are incapable of providing basic services to the millions of inhabitants. Corruption of governments and an absence of social services lead to a “survival of the fittest” mentality.¹¹⁸ The challenges U.S. forces will face are identical to those the Marines encountered in Hue. The relevance of training in urban operations is more important today than in recent years. With the vast majority of its armed forces based in the United States, the American military will have to conduct force projection operations that require support facilities such as sea and airports of debarkation. These facilities are primarily located in or near urban areas. Hence, urban operations will be required under almost any scenario that requires deployment.¹¹⁹ U.S. combat units must prepare to conduct opposed and unopposed forced entry that most likely will involve operations in urban environments. So what must the military do to prepare for the eventuality of urban warfare?

¹¹⁷ David Grange, “Training and Readiness for Urban Operations,” in *Capital Preservation: Preparing for Urban Operations in the Twenty-First Century: Proceedings of the Urban Operations Conference, March 22-23, 2000*, by the RAND Arroyo-TRADOC-MCML-OSD (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000), 289.

¹¹⁸ John R. Groves, “Operations in Urban Environment,” *Military Review*, July-August 1998 [journal online]; available from <http://www.cgsc.army.mil/MilRev/English/JulAug98/groves.htm>; Internet; accessed on 03 February 2000.

¹¹⁹ Michael E. Hamlet, “MOUT: The Key to Training Military Forces in the Twenty-First Century” (MMAS monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, 1999), 40.

General Charles C. Krulak, former Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps, declared his Marines must prepare for the “Three Block War,” in which they will find themselves conducting different types of operations within an urban complex.¹²⁰ This requires extensive training in a myriad of tasks ranging from food distribution, non-combatant evacuation, medical treatment, and social services reconstruction to riot control, and finally, to combat operations. The American military needs to develop joint and combined arms training methods and facilities that enable units to conduct multiple operations within an urban environment. The Marines at Hue knew the importance of joint and combined arms effort to clear the city, but a lack of training constantly hindered efforts to bring the full measure of combat power to bear on the battlefield. The first and probably last exposure to close-quarter combat training occurred during basic training at Parris Island, so fighting in Hue highlighted the deficiencies in USMC doctrine and training. The Marines learned their lessons the hard way by trial and error, a process costly in casualties. Clearing buildings, room-by-room and block-by-block, demonstrated the difficulties encountered by a well-motivated and entrenched enemy with superior defensive lines of fire and training in city fighting. At Hue the Marines experienced directed fires from every dimension and they had to adopt techniques that methodically eliminated every angle from which the enemy placed fires on them. “The layout of the street also provided the opportunity to prepare well-camouflaged, almost invisible positions between houses at the base of the thick, ancient foliage growing between the houses,” Nicholas Warr recalled. “For four days, we had been directing our fires at the windows and doors, and although we had most certainly been taking enemy

¹²⁰ Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine* (Quantico, Virginia), no. 1 (January 1999), 4.

fires from those positions, we had also been taking deadly enemy fire from ground level, from the fighting holes dug in under the bushes between many houses.”¹²¹ Today’s U.S. ground troops, both soldiers and marines as well as special operations forces, must train to encounter an enemy engaging from every angle and position to gain positional advantage over superior U.S. firepower. Only in the past few years has the military begun training in the variety of tasks associated with fighting in urban areas. Current engagement policies demand that U.S. forces be able to execute tasks not normally part of a unit’s wartime mission, such as separation of belligerents within a town, riot prevention and control, search and seizure of weapon caches, counterinsurgency operations, humanitarian relief, support to domestic agencies, law enforcement, and close-quarter combat if necessary. These tasks require a shift in doctrine to take into account the complexities of urban warfare and the challenges they must train and prepare to overcome.

In 1968, training doctrine was limited to a couple of manuals that did not meet the contingencies faced by Marines and soldiers fighting in Hue. Marine Corps’ urban operations doctrine, embodied in *Combat in Built-Up Areas and Attack on a Fortified Position*, summed up what Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham has learned from his research prior to departing for Hue: the best way to fight through a city was to “gas the enemy, blow things up, and then clear out the ruins.”¹²² These tactics, designed to overcome quickly an enemy entrenched position through use of direct fire and fire support, ensured the eventual success of the Marines but required lethal instruction from their enemy.

¹²¹ Nicholas Warr, *Phase Line Green: The Battle for Hue, 1968* (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 160-161.

¹²² Eric Hammel, *Fire in the Streets: The Battle for Hue, 1968* (California: Pacifica Press, 1991), 134.

Brute force mentality and raw courage, though successful, caused numerous casualties among the Marines. More disturbing than the fact that the battalion commander had to search for ways to destroy his enemy is that the Marines under him knew even less and paid a stiff price to relearn tactical methods to extract NVA forces.

Today, these methods seem archaic when confronted with the challenges faced after destruction of a major city. Emerging U.S. Army and Marine Corps doctrine covers in detail tactics, techniques and procedures on how to fight in complex urban environments. The Marines' newest manual, *MCWP 3-35.3 Military Operations in Urban Terrain*, provides detailed operational and tactical instruction that reflects many of the important lessons learned at Hue about fire, maneuver, and communication in a complex environment. It furnishes the appropriate TTPs required of all marines to destroy an entrenched enemy without the horrific effects of pulverizing the city itself. Minimizing collateral damage and civilian casualties is just as important as the methods used to fight in urban environments. As the Department of Defense's lead agency, the USMC is on the cutting edge of urban warfare. What remains to determine is if these TTPs are the correct ones for future operations to ensure mission accomplishment with minimal casualties.

The U.S. Army has also worked recently on changing its doctrine to face the myriad of urban warfare challenges. The recently published *Field Manual (FM) 3-06.11, Combined Arms Operations in Urban Terrain* incorporates TTPs that encapsulates the lessons of Hue, Somalia, and Grozny to ensure overwhelming force applied to any urban situation. Army operational concept dictates that forces engaged must **Assess** the urban environment, **Shape** the conditions to isolate the battlefield, **Dominat**e by conducting

simultaneous and sequential actions to establish pre-eminent control over decisive points, and then **Transition** to further missions such as peace enforcement, peace keeping, or transfer of control to local or international authorities.¹²³ This operational concept provides a cornerstone for future operations against a variety of urban conflicts.

The shortcoming of the two abovementioned manuals is the stress on actual combat operations. Although an analysis of tactical combat operations is certainly the scope of this study, further research must address operations in urban environments that do not necessarily involve combat, but that will challenge U.S. forces. For instance, U.S. doctrine expounds little on counterinsurgency operations, peace support operations, and humanitarian relief operations, working with non-governmental agencies, training police forces, infrastructure construction, and development of local government. These tasks are extremely difficult, and while not addressed by the Marines in Hue in 1968, they are certainly required to maintain peace in an ever-growing urban conflict. To assist U.S. forces facing these challenges and be successful on any urban battlefield, they must have the tools to help them mitigate problems, and dominate over the full spectrum of operations we encounter.

In 1968, the Marines used a variety of weapons to figure out the best way to destroy an entrenched enemy. The integration of the NVA defense was extremely complex and deadly. It required the Marines to use every weapon in their arsenal to recapture the city. The combined use of tanks and Ontos to blast their way through walls and buildings followed by aggressive assault of infantryman proved both effective and destructive. This technique caused substantial casualties and left the city of Hue in ruins.

¹²³ Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-06, Urban Operations* (Washington DC: GPO, 2002), 5-1.

“The Citadel had been dealt a rougher blow with the air strikes, naval gunfire, and artillery along the northeast wall and other places,” Keith Nolan wrote of Hue after the battle. “The estimates tallied 10,000 houses either destroyed or damaged, roughly forty percent of the city.”¹²⁴ One of the tenets of evolving doctrine requires U.S. forces engaged in urban warfare to minimize collateral damage. Recent developments in precision-guided munitions provide the means to destroy a single building without significant impact to surrounding ones. The real difficulty for ground troops is house-to-house clearance of a city or street. The latest doctrine gives detailed instructions on clearance, but the results may be very similar to that of Hue. To avoid this, new weapons that create the capability to defeat or destroy an enemy without the resulting collateral damage are required. The Department of Defense must develop non-lethal weapons that enable ground forces to quell riots, maintain order and disable threats with minimal force. DOD must develop technologies that enable ground forces to “see” the enemy and develop the situation to determine the amount of force required. The extensive use of smaller Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) down to platoon and squad level enables them to mitigate risks, prevent surprise, and develop courses of action to defeat a threat. Man-portable thermobaric devices can give ground forces the edge they need to defeat entrenched enemy forces without exposure to enemy fires. The Marines’ ingenuity enabled them to overcome their technological difficulties and develop methods to succeed and defeat their adversary. The American warrior of the 21st century will have at his disposal a vast arsenal to safeguard his men, assess the situation, and overwhelm the

¹²⁴ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 183.

enemy and transition to a follow-on mission while preventing undue collateral damage and civilian casualties.

Among the most complex challenges in urban warfare that the U.S. military faces is the need for carefully structured rules of engagement (ROE). U.S. forces must have the flexibility to apply combat power to defeat an urban adversary without unnecessary political guidance to hamstring its effort. They must operate under flexible ROE that do not restrict their ability to perform the mission assigned with all capabilities possessed. American troops will often engage an adversary who does not abide by any ROE but is quick to complain of violations they may commit of their own rules. They will operate on an urban conflict spectrum from ethnic cleansing, terrorism, suicide bombing, indiscriminate use of booby traps and mines, hostage taking, sabotage, and efforts to obtain favorable media attention.¹²⁵ The American military must prepare itself for all eventualities in order to avoid frustration and anger caused by restrictive ROE. U.S. forces must train on an ROE to become comfortable operating in a restrictive environment. They must drill “what-if” scenarios down to the fire-team level because often, young sergeants and corporals make difficult decisions that can have grave strategic consequences. Commanders at all levels must assess the operational and tactical risks associated with an inability to respond with the full measure of force. The risk assessment must account for political, social, racial, ethical, and economics factors that will have direct bearing on the effectiveness of combat operations.¹²⁶

The Battle for Hue opened a window on the likely battlefield of the 21st century. There are many challenges that remain which the U.S. armed forces must address through

¹²⁵ Groves, “Operations in Urban Environment,” 5.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 6.

technology, doctrine, training, and policy. Knowledge of the enemy and situational understanding are two crucial components in urban operations. When they received their orders to move to Hue, Captain Batcheller lacked any substantial information to facilitate his unit's mission. Moving blindly into the city, A/1-1 Marines stumbled into a web of entrenched NVA forces that began a 26-day process to extract systematically resulting in terrible casualties. U.S. military leaders must ensure that American forces today remain fully trained in the myriad of complex tasks required to fight in urban environment. The country cannot afford to face unprepared an enemy as aggressive and well- trained as the NVA and VC forces were in city street-fighting. The Marines' focus on jungle war fighting caught them completely unaware and unprepared for the battle they encountered at Hue. Only through raw determination, superior firepower, and adaptive leadership were they able to overcome enemy forces and recapture the city. U.S. armed forces, already possessing the advantage of superior technology, aggressive small-unit leadership, and high esprit-de-corps, must complement those strengths with the integration of demanding urban operations training into every type of mission training environment. The Battle for Hue provides a means to measure the multitude of threats the American military may encounter on a future urban battlefield. That conflict stands a grim example of the lethality of a well-trained enemy entrenched in an urban setting and facing unprepared forces. It was an experience that must not be repeated.

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VITA

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