

Lessons Learned

Charlie 1/5, Operation Hue City

31 January 1968 to 5 March 1968

Even under the best of circumstances, street fighting is a bloody business. This was, in the end, the ultimate lesson learned by the United States Marine Corps personnel who participated in this historical battle, considered by many to be the bloodiest of the Vietnam War.

The Marine forces involved in Operation Hue City lost 142 Marines killed in action during the month-long battle, including the initial fierce clashes involving, primarily, fighting throughout the southern sections of the city, and the climactic full-scale battles inside the Citadel fortress itself. Hundreds more Marines were wounded and had to be medevacced on both sides of the river. Enemy casualty estimates range well into the thousands.

Although Operation Hue City will be long remembered as an overwhelming victory over the best conventional forces the enemy could throw at us, and although the Fifth Marines overcame very unfavorable odds and ultimately triumphed in the finest traditions of Marines in combat, in truth this battle was a very close thing. At the squad, platoon and company levels casualty rates were very severe, as high as 75% or more in some units.

This was especially true during the first day or two of each unit's initial experience in full scale urban combat.

The ultimate success of this operation could have been significantly improved, in our opinion, by several factors, including:

1. Improved (less restrictive) rules of engagement, including situational flexibility down to the platoon level.

2. Improved communication of intelligence information to all levels of command.

3. Acquisition of improved intelligence data, in particular concerning the disposition and size of enemy forces.

Reconnaissance and small unit probes to fix enemy positions are critical.

4. Improved supporting fire plan. Access to artillery, naval gunfire, direct fire from armored vehicles, and air support should be judiciously deployed.

5. Significantly increased training for urban conflict (street fighting). Practice and preparation.

6. Deployment of available chemical weapons (tear gas) for offensive operations during the early stages of the operation.

7. Improved dissemination of operational plan details, down to the fire team level.

On the other side of the scale, small unit experience, individual Marine determination, the buddy system, the quick

learning capacity of Marines under combat conditions, the combined leadership (officers, staff NCO's and NCO's) of 1/5 at all levels, and the ultimate ability to coordinate fire support and execute street fighting tactics under heavy fire were the factors that won this pivotal battle, despite incredible odds, high casualty rates and the resulting turnover of officers and NCO's. Certainly, using the 20/20 perspective of hindsight, this battle could have been decided in an even more timely and decisive fashion, reducing friendly casualty rates in the process, by paying attention to the fundamentals of planning Marine operations. Proper prior planning prevents p--- poor performance.

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The following details regarding the lessons learned from Operation Hue City are offered from former members of Charlie Company, First Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, First Marine Division, who served in combat during Operation Hue City, and who were directly involved in the battle with NVA forces inside the Citadel fortress from 13 February 1968 through 5 March 1968:

Situation.

Terrain:

There is an infinite variety of possible landscapes that may be confronted by a Marine force given the mission of attacking an

enemy force in urban terrain. When the Tet Offensive broke out on 31 January 1968, and conventional NVA forces overran major sections of the largest cities in South Vietnam, Marine forces were, literally, knee-deep in rice paddies and jungle mud. Since first establishing a beachhead in 1965, Marines had been assigned the mission of conducting a counter-insurgency, a rural conflict, fighting for the most part a guerrilla army. The Tet Offensive changed all of that, and for the first time since the height of the Korean War, in 1954, Marines found themselves with a mission that involved urban combat.

Preparing to remove an enemy battalion that has captured a 40-story skyscraper or a college campus is a much different mission than getting an enemy squad out of a house, school or church in a small town. The common factor in all of these variations, however, is that in all cases, *in urban combat structures dominate the terrain.*

Studying and assessing terrain is a fundamental issue for Marine commanders when planning missions. This is even more critical in planning house-to-house combat operations. Building materials vary worldwide in their ability to provide small-arms cover to a very high degree.

Through use of reconnaissance and intelligence, we recommend conducting a serious assessment of each building or structure that is within your unit's area of operations, because tactics

involved in taking each objective (building, structure, etc.) may be different in each case. A small, wood frame house may offer the illusion of cover from small arms fire but little else; in some places walls are paper thin. Even houses that use some form of plaster or concrete construction can prove to be unexpectedly porous at the worst possible time.

Know the basic layout of a structure, as much as possible, before entry. Approach each structure with an entry plan and a search plan, and make sure each member of each fire team and squad is well-versed in these plans. Establish voice codes and commands, and communicate regularly with each other. Consider entryways (existing doors and windows) to be extremely dangerous, likely locations for booby traps, and to be avoided if at all possible. Wherever possible, blow entry holes using satchel charges or rockets. Once the entry plan is finalized and understood, it must be executed with fierce determination. Be prepared for anything, and be ready to improvise. Be systematic, and check everything (basements, sewer access, attics, rooftops, trash cans) thoroughly before establishing that objective as secure.

The other aspect of urban terrain are the spaces between the buildings. Streets, alleys and other pathways are normal routes for humans, and therefore must be suspected to be under

observation and possible enemy firing lanes. Whenever possible, take the most difficult route from house to house.

Establish, in advance, a plan on what to do in the event non-combatants are found in urban combat zones, and for marking buildings that have been cleared.

Make absolutely sure that your Marines are aware that while inside a building being secured, *they are at risk from both within and without*. Always assume that every room, of every floor, in each and every house, contains enemy soldiers. Always move very quickly when moving in front of windows or doorways. Always know where enemy positions may be in buildings that are adjacent to yours. As in all Marine operations, watch your buddy's back, and run as fast as possible when traversing open ground.

Multiple story structures present an even greater challenge than single story buildings. In a medium-size village or town, or small city, that is dominated by one-, two- and three-story buildings, be very particular about the taller buildings, which are naturally used by the enemy as the "high ground." If possible, make entry to taller, multi-level buildings via the roof, and work systematically and thoroughly downward.

Mission:

The mission assigned to Marine forces during Operation Hue City was to remove enemy forces that had captured major sections of the ancient imperial capital of Hue during the surprise NVA offensive that was quickly dubbed the Tet Offensive. Due to the historic aspect of many of the buildings in Hue, the usage of heavy weapons was significantly restricted during the initial days of fighting on both sides of the river. As friendly casualties mounted, and as initial estimates of the size of the enemy force in the Hue City area was significantly increased, fire restrictions were ultimately lifted. In our respectful opinion, our ability to successfully complete the mission was, initially, severely impacted by the rules of engagement.

Although it is understood that mission and rules of engagement are not the exclusive responsibility of Marine leadership at the platoon, company, battalion or even the regimental level, it is strongly recommended that every effort is made, at every level in the chain of command, to ensure that balance has been achieved between the demands of the mission and the affect of the rules of engagement on the ability of the command to perform the mission successfully.

Execution:

Reconnaissance and Intelligence:

Urban combat is nearly always conducted at very close quarters. It is not uncommon to have opposing forces fighting from positions a few dozen meters apart; most of the fighting is done from a distance between 50 and 500 meters. Due to this close-in nature, it is critical to know where the enemy is and how they are deployed. This lesson was learned the hard way during the initial stages of the battle inside the Citadel. During the first two major clashes between Marine and NVA forces on the morning of 13 February 1968, the enemy surprised us and wreaked significant damage very quickly. This was because we weren't exactly sure where they were. Although the ARVN had been in several major battles inside the Citadel, I don't recall receiving any intelligence attributed to them regarding the enemy's exact location. Further, to my knowledge, no Marine recon unit was sent in to check out the situation before we attacked on the morning of the 13th.

We recommend that all intelligence assets, recon units, and surveillance devices that can be made available are deployed in a significant effort to fix the exact location of enemy soldiers and units. The combatant who knows where his enemy is hiding

experiences a decided advantage in surprise and the deployment of firepower.

Urban Combat Tactics:

The tragedy of urban conflict is that the "battlefield" for each firefight is a neighborhood; each objective taken, is someone's home, or a school or church, or some other structure that has value and more or less significant meaning to its inhabitants. Considering the possibilities, it is not difficult to imagine tank battles across mall parking lots; mortar fire hitting a church, a hospital, a community center; heavy small-arms firefights between homes; an artillery barrage on a school yard. While these images may be grist for the mills of Hollywood, when we think about them in relevance to our homes and our neighborhood schools and churches, the tragedy is somehow increased, made more politic. However, it is our collective belief that the life of one Marine is more precious than ten, one hundred homes, schools, churches, shrines, shopping malls, or any other building known to man. Therefore, all efforts should be made, using any and all weaponry available, to stun the enemy and support Marine advances through the use of supporting arms *and without regard to damage to buildings.*

At the same time, the use of heavy weaponry in urban combat is an assuredly "two-edged sword," as are many assets in modern warfare. Rubble can be nearly as affective as a building for

protecting enemy firing positions. Further, artillery and other "flat trajectory" weapons may be somewhat restricted by the height of buildings and their distance from each other. In many cases, mortars, although smaller in caliber, are superior to artillery because of their higher trajectory.

Supporting Arms:

Supporting arms are most effective prior to "danger close" to minimize the potential of friendly casualties, and to maximize preparatory fires to support the infantry's attack. During Operation Hue City, the most effective indirect fire during "danger close" was from the 8 inch gun. We recommend that the supporting axis of fire be perpendicular as well as parallel. Finally, in the event, as in the case of Operation Hue City, that due to political considerations that proper preparatory fires would not be allowed, that a variety of artillery fires such as smoke, delayed fuses, high angle, etc. be incorporated with the infantry's attack. Combined arms training for urban combat is critical.

Other advantages of preparatory fires include the destruction of the camouflage of enemy positions, the psychological shock factor against enemy troops, and the fact that heavy weapons can create new avenues of attack and egress for armored vehicles.

One of the most effective aspects of supporting arms during the battle for Hue were the "killer teams" that evolved; an M-48 tank and an Ontos would pair up and maneuver together as a team. This would allow either the tank or the Ontos to maneuver into a good firing position, while the other covered. Further, the devastating firepower put out by the 90mm tank cannon and the (6) 106's of the Ontos turned out to be extremely beneficial because of their capabilities to deliver pinpoint firepower. Armored vehicles can provide many benefits to the infantry engaged in urban combat, as they provide some cover from enemy small arms fire. However, armored vehicles can also become "rocket magnets" producing casualties for infantry troops in close proximity.

Other than in instances of harassment and interdiction fires, buildings that are hit by heavy weapons should be attacked immediately, using whatever shock benefit that may be derived, and all efforts made to clear and neutralize all enemy positions in that particular building before the attack is stopped (whenever possible).

Remember that when calling in fire missions, you can request "splash" so that friendly troops have time to take cover immediately prior to impact.

In daytime operations, the usage of covering smoke is often helpful when Marines must attack across open areas.

However, as was learned during Operation Hue City, even with proper support of heavy weapons, which was ultimately provided to the Marines, we faced "hard corps" North Vietnamese Army troops who fought from prepared positions, moved to secondary positions, fought again, and finally, very reluctantly, died. In the capture of each room, each floor, each rooftop, each building, each street, it was ultimately the Marine rifleman who won the battle.

It is critical for infantry units to know both the capabilities as well as the *limitations* of supporting arms. For example, naval gunfire is a more flat trajectory weapon, and not necessarily effective due to the vertical terrain (buildings). Further, in our experience, it was not smart to be on the gun-target line because the first round was typically not as accurate as artillery or mortars, in terms of range specified.

Another aspect of supporting arms limitations has to do with helicopter support. Urban terrain is not forgiving to helicopters that may be forced to make an emergency landing. Thus, helicopter pilots may be reluctant to fly over urban terrain. Further, maneuvering helicopters in urban terrain is a very difficult and dangerous proposition.

One very tragic aspect of the use of supporting arms in urban combat is that the likelihood of civilian casualties is very high. In at least two situations that we are aware of, the

NVA used civilians as "screens" for their infantry troops, and fire missions were, of necessity, called in on those positions.

On the Use of Chemical Weapons:

During 1/5's battle inside the Citadel fortress, which kicked off on 13 February 1968, the battalion progressed a total of four blocks along our avenue of attack, and had secured a total of sixteen city blocks within our assigned area of operations after nearly two weeks of heavy street fighting and after suffering nearly 50% casualties at the hands of a well-prepared, determined force of NVA soldiers, a force that was finally estimated to be nearly 11,000 strong in the Hue City area of operations. On 25 February 1968, Marines from Charlie Company shot off three E-8 gas launchers, each carrying about 40 CS gas grenades, toward the enemy's last known position. The next morning, 1/5 took control of the remaining twelve city blocks in about three hours, without a single casualty, because the NVA was not equipped to deal with the tear gas attack and was forced to withdraw. No one can ever be certain that the use of chemical weapons would have made a difference in the initial stages of the battle (although we were all issued new gas masks the day before we went into Hue City!), but many of the veterans of that battle have often wondered what might have happened if the E-8's had been deployed in the early stages of the battle. We recommend

the judicious use of chemical weapons, such as tear gas, etc. for urban combat operations.

Administration:

Planning and Preparations:

The inherent complexities of urban combat are such that special attention needs to be paid toward planning and preparations. Training, training, training; practice makes perfect. A coordinated Marine attack on an enemy-held position in a town or city can be equated to an intricate opera or Broadway production, although the stakes are a bit higher. Entry techniques, room search and clearing techniques, voice commands indicating movement or progress, fire discipline, the use of grenades, rockets, and supporting fires, communications, all of these must be rehearsed and improved, until they are second nature.

Further, all plans must be communicated and rehearsed at each level of command, from the fire team to the company and above. In particular, platoon commanders, platoon sergeants, squad leaders and fire team leaders must be aware of each man's assignment. This should include who goes into a structure first, who covers. Hand and arm signals, as well as vocal commands should be established and practiced.

Medical: Input from Doc John Loudermilk.

The following recommendations are made regarding training and preparations for field corpsmen who support Marine units in urban combat:

- Augment corpsmen's field pack with a medical surgical kit and antibiotic creams.
- Increase knowledge of:
 - ✓ Treatment of rashes and dermatitis.
 - ✓ Treatment for opening airways / crico thyroidotomy.
 - ✓ Treatment of battle trauma (psychological).
- C. P. R. certification / refresher.
- Periodic training sessions at B.A.S. or R.A.S., and discuss ongoing problem resolution in the field, answering questions of corpsmen.
- Increase knowledge of childbirth procedures. Although this comment was made in a somewhat lighthearted way, there is a serious aspect to this issue. Doc Loudermilk helped a Vietnamese woman give birth during the battle inside the Citadel.
- Follow up information regarding casualties back to their unit.
- Time off after major battles.
- Better record keeping.

- Small, motorized vehicles will be required for both supply and medical evacuation. This will reduce the number of able-bodied Marines required to move wounded to the rear area.

Command and Control:

In full-scale urban conflict, especially in situations where enemy dispositions are not well known, initial contact with the enemy can be (a.) unexpected, (b.) at very close range, and (c.) massively devastating. Command and control, the basic Marine's connection to his leadership, can disappear in the blink of an eye. During Operation Hue City, C/1/5 lost all of its officers except two; SSgt's became platoon commanders; PFC's were squad leaders. In urban combat it would not be at all surprising to find PFC's as platoon commanders, given the potentially high casualty rates. The critical factor for unit survival in these situations is that unit's ability to immediately determine the enemy's positions and to return a high volume of sustained fire on those positions, allowing maneuverability, despite the situation with the chain of command.

During the first day of 1/5's involvement in Operation Hue City, Alpha Company lost its C.O., its X.O. and much of the company C.P. Group. Of necessity, Alpha was pulled back to the battalion rear for reorganization. The loss of a few leaders

effectively eliminated an entire company. This also delayed the battalion's attack, blunting our initiative.

The individual Marine who is under heavy enemy fire from very close range, who may now be cut off from his team and/or squad leader, needs to have been thoroughly informed of communications codes, lines of departure, lines of stoppage, friendly unit dispositions and the ability to call in supporting fires and conduct contingency plans. In short, in urban conflict situations, command and control needs to be understood at every level down to the basic Marine. Based upon our experiences during Operation Hue City, expect the unexpected, expect chaos, and plan for all possibilities.

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