

A COMPANY COMMANDER REFLECTS ON OPERATION HUE CITY

By Capt G. R. Christmas

The best lesson learned was that imagination and aggressiveness are the best weapons in a commander's arsenal.

Calmly smoking a cigar, the Skipper sits on a metal chair on the second floor hallway of the bullet-pocked headquarters of the newly recaptured ARVN armory. His platoons have just overrun a vast walled compound crammed with U.S. weapons and equipment for the South Vietnamese forces.

He reflects on his next objective: clearing out several blocks of tiled roof houses across the street and finding an American VIP.

The radio crackles. It is the leader of the 1st Platoon. The Skipper listens, then says: "You need more C-4 to breach walls? Can you go ahead without it? Okay, then go ahead. We'll try to get it up fast as possible."

Just then a stream of Vietnamese, mostly middle class citizenry by the look of their clothes, come out of a side street into the avenue the Marines are about to attack across.

The Skipper passes the word to guide them to the rear. Then a grimy Marine climbs a broken staircase, prodding a young tightlipped Vietnamese in ARVN uniform and wearing pajamas underneath.

"Is he VC or what?" asks the sniper sergeant. "You never know."

The order is given: "Treat him as a POW until we turn him over to battalion; let them handle it."

The Skipper checks his platoons by radio. "All ready," he says. "Okay, tiger, go get 'em."

Accompanied by the ear shattering explosions of C-4 breaching charges and a blast from a supporting Ontos, the Marine squads run quickly across the street; every man is hunched over, bulky as a football player in his armored vest, helmet, banniers, and pack.

There is no wild firing. The Marines blow holes in the white-washed walls, then quickly move into the next yard. "It's a squad leader's war, this kind of fighting," says the captain, observing the scene from a window.

*Adapted from a report by
Peter Braestrup
The Washington Post, 12 Feb 1968*

IT has been more than three years since I commanded H/2/5 during the seizure of the southern portion of the Hue City. As I reflect on those days, I realize I learned a great deal about house to house fighting, much of it through trial and error.

Hue is the ancient imperial capital of Vietnam and lies one hundred kilometers south of the 17th Parallel. It is the third largest city in South Vietnam. Hue is not built like a typical Oriental city since it is a mixture of both Vietnamese and French. Actually, it is two cities separated by the Perfume River. The city's French colony was south of the river and Hue University is located there now. The north side of the city holds the Imperial Citadel where rulers of Vietnam held court in earlier days.

The citadel is the walled portion of Hue and is surrounded by either canals or moats. It is built around the imperial palace, and the barrier around the citadel forms a 2,500-meter square. The outer stone wall was between one and three meters thick and five meters high and was separated from the inner wall by dirt fill. The distance between the two walls is 75 meters in some areas. This, of course, was ideal for the construction of fortified positions. The NVA did not miss the opportunity.

During the night of 30-31 January 1968, the enemy, mostly NVA troops, entered the city of Hue and the battle was begun. They took advantage of the Tet holidays, confident that the Allied defenses would surely be relaxed. One thing about the battle of Hue, however, was that it did not commence until the 31st of January, while the remainder of the enemy offensive throughout the rest of the country commenced 24-36 hours earlier. As a result of this, Gen Trong, Commanding General, 1st ARVN Division, had placed his forces on 100% alert. This precautionary act was instrumental in preventing the NVA from gaining control of the entire city.

The NVA used a total of about 10 battalions in the battle. These included the 4th and 6th Regiments, which had under their control, the 810th, 806th and 802nd Battalions on the northern side of the river; and the 804th, K4C and K4D Battalions on the southern side. In addition to these units, there were two sapper battalions, six local force companies, and several unidentified mortar battalions. Elements of other unidentified units also became involved in the subsequent action.

The enemy appeared to have two prime objective—the MACV compound in the southern portion of the city and the 1st ARVN Division headquarters in the Citadel. By morning of 31 January, they had seized the entire city except for their two prime objectives. These objectives were never seized.

This account of the battle will consider only Marine Corps participation. However, it should be noted that the 1st ARVN Division and later the Vietnamese Marines fought extremely well within the Citadel and on the northern outskirts of the city. Their casualties reflect this—384 killed and 1,800 wounded.

On the 31st, elements from 2/5 (LtCol Ernest Cheatham) and 1/1 (LtCol Marcus Gravel) were sent to relieve pressure on the MACV compound located on the southern side of the Perfume River. The 1/1 command group accompanied them. The U.S. and ARVN plan of attack at this point was really a reaction operation. There did not seem to be any set plan, perhaps because so little information was really available at this time.

Marine units were tasked with a threefold mission:

- (1) Destroy as many of the enemy as possible.
- (2) Keep their own casualties to a minimum.
- (3) Spare as much of the city from destruction as was humanly possible.

(Everyone understood the first two; but accomplishment of the third task seemed impossible.)

At about 0830 in the morning of the 31st, A/1/1 tried to reach the MACV compound. They met heavy resistance in the area of the An Cuu Bridge on Route One. About 1027, G/2/5 (Capt Chuck Meadows) and the 1/1 command group were ordered into the battle. They picked up Company A en route and arrived at the compound about 1445. At 1515, the senior advisor of the 1st ARVN Division met with LtCol Gravel and told him that everything at the Citadel was in good shape, but he was concerned about the safety of U.S. nationals. He wanted the Marines to assist in their evacuation. Company G started across the Perfume River on the bridge which led to the Citadel. Two platoons made it across under heavy fire, but it soon became obvious that we had no understanding of what the situation was at the Citadel—and there were a lot more bad guys in there than we anticipated from the initial report. At 2000, after nearly five hours of sustained fighting, G/2/5 was ordered to return across the bridge; and the two companies and command group spent the night around the MACV compound.

On 1 February, F/2/5 (Capt Mike Downs) reinforced the compound and was joined on 2 February by H/2/5. On 3 February, the command group of 2/5 arrived and clearance of the southern portion of the city was begun in earnest. During those two days, however, A/1/1 and G/2/5 had been fighting a holding action, waiting for the rest of the task grouped battalion.

The axis of advance for 2/5 on 3 February was generally along Lei Loy Street which runs parallel to the Perfume River. It is my impression that the NVA expected the relieving forces would be

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ARVN and would arrive in APC's with tanks; and move directly up Lei Loy to the Province Capitol building or the city jail. The way they set their defenses indicated this.

The defenses were set in strong points several blocks apart. The strong point was normally a three-story building, surrounded by a courtyard, with a stone fence. Snipers were placed in the upper stories (as well as throughout other buildings along the route of advance); automatic weapons in the lower floor. Spider holes surrounded the courtyard. Each spider hole had an NVA soldier equipped with both an AK-47 assault rifle and a B-40 rocket launcher. It was obvious that the enemy planned to cut off the relieving force at either end of the convoy after it had passed the first strong point unopposed. The task force would then be annihilated. Of course, the other streets on the southern side were also defended, usually with snipers and bunkers. The City Treasury, the battalion's first objective, was also heavily fortified. But the primary defenses appeared to be along Lei Loy Street.

When we advanced on the enemy by house to house fighting, we defeated the enemy tactics. Instead of walking into a trap, we gained the advantage of a coordinated attack—one unit covering for another.

By this time, the CO, 1st Marine Regiment (Col Hughes) had taken charge of all Marine units in the city.

1/5 (LtCol Thompson) entered the fight around the 11th of February. They passed through 2/5 and 1/1, who had secured most of the southern portion of the city and were beginning to operate across the Song Loi Nong. 2/5 and 1/1 continued clearing the entire southern side of the Perfume River, while 1/5 joined the fight to secure the vital Citadel walls.

Marine armor was left open to direct rocket and recoilless rifle fire on the long, straight streets of the Citadel as well as on the streets of the south-



Capt Christmas commanded H/2/5 during the operation he describes, receiving the Navy Cross for his part in the battle. He is presently an instructor at the Army Institute for Military Assistance, Ft. Bragg, N. C.

ern side. Their movement was completely canalized; and because enemy fire was from several blocks away, the close-in protection provided by the Marine companies had little deterrent effect. The thick, stone walls of the Citadel were ideal places for the enemy's automatic weapons.

Even the weather favored the NVA, since the overcast skies allowed no support by air during the first week of the battle. 1/5 slammed into the enemy on the northeast wall on the 14th and began to move, with the ARVN, toward seizure of the Citadel. (It is interesting to note that on the 16th the enemy commander was killed and his replacement immediately requested permission to withdraw. He was instructed to remain in place.)

On 21 February, the U.S. 1st Cavalry (Air Mobile) began operations northwest of the city and then took up blocking positions along the enemy's likely avenues of retreat. They were thus in perfect position when the remnants of the enemy began to flee. By 25 February the battle was over.

There is no doubt in my mind that the enemy had fully expected to hold Hue. His plans were spoiled for two basic reasons. First, he had expected the people to welcome him with open arms. They did not! Second, he didn't expect us to attack house to house and was too inflexible to cope with our tactics. "Charlie" lost a great battle, and he still feels the effects.

Let's consider some of the practical lessons learned by H/2/5. The first area of interest is the



Marine tank enters Hue City after crossing the River of Perfumes.



A Marine of H/2/5 carries an old woman out of the danger zone.

use of supporting arms:

► Although the 3.5 rocket launcher and the LAAW are organic to the rifle company, they should be discussed here. We found the 3.5 was invaluable, and in most cases, better than the LAAW. It packed a much greater punch which enabled us to breach the many stone walls of the city. We didn't have this success with the LAAW.

► In addition, we learned that when firing at a window with either weapon, it is better to hit just below the window rather than through it. This creates the desired shrapnel effect, instead of the round sailing through the room and not eliminating the man at the window.

► The 106mm recoilless rifle was our real workhorse. We found that in addition to its normal uses, it could be used to cover a force crossing a street because of the dust and smoke which the blast creates.

Too often, when we were about to attack across a street into the next building complex we found that the NVA occupied a flanking position several blocks away which provided accurate grazing fire down the street we were to cross. As previously indicated, 2/5 was composed of just three companies, leaving little flexibility of response and an exposed flank.

Well, the NVA has read our FM's, so that when we "popped smoke" as cover to cross the street, they would open up. The tactics we developed was to use the back blast smoke of the 106 to cover and conceal our movement across the street. We did this by popping smoke to determine where the fire was coming from and, once this was done,

moving a "mule-mounted" 106 partially into the street and firing a round toward the NVA position. This caused the NVA soldiers to pull down their heads and the lead element would cross the street concealed by the back blast smoke. Once a foothold was gained in the next block, fire could be directed from our new position to eliminate the NVA fire.

► Another weapon which proved invaluable was the mortar, both the 60mm and the 81mm. I realize that doctrine indicates that the mortar is generally not effective in built up areas; however, in Hue, this was not the case. We developed two tactics with our mortars that were extremely effective. The first one was a "willie peter screen."

On several occasions we were called upon to cross the bridges over the Song Loi Nong. Usually these crossings were contested and several times units were forced back with heavy casualties because of the good fire that the NVA had on the bridges. What we developed was simply to register a white phosphorus round on the street about 200 meters across the bridge. After registering, we called for a concentration of WP followed by HE, and under this cover crossed the bridge. The WP concealed our movement, while the HE made "Charlie" pull in his head.

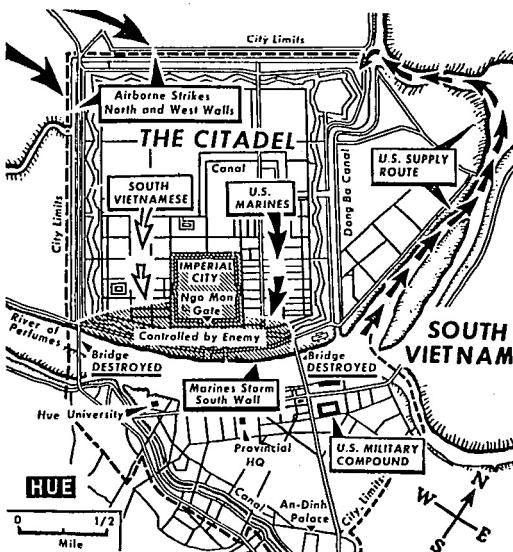
Another important use for our mortars was in attacking a building complex. Once we had gotten a foothold in a contested building, the enemy would flee out the rear windows and into the next block. This brought a tremendous control problem for us, because when a Marine sees an enemy soldier fleeing out the back he runs as fast as he

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can to a rear window to shoot him. It looked like Keystone Cops. However, we learned that by pre-registering on both the objective and the street to the enemy's rear we could inflict heavy enemy casualties by shifting fire from the objective to the rear street as we assaulted.

As the book says, artillery is not too effective in a built-up area because it usually cannot be observed. However, we did use it effectively for harassing and interdicting enemy movement. Often, intelligence from refugees indicated a large concentration of enemy in a particular area or building complex such as the city's yacht club. In that case, H&I fires were directed there for two nights prior to our arrival with good results.

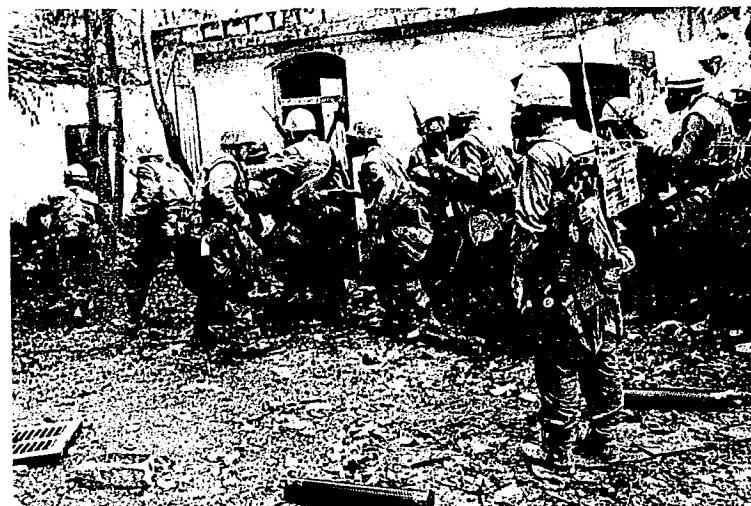
► The second area of interest is our effective use of riot control agents—CS (tear gas and smoke). On 5 February, we came up against the heavily fortified Thau Thien Province Capital building. We were attacking from a hospital complex that we had seized the day before. The capital building was defended as a strong point such as I have previously described. We were receiving a heavy volume of fire not only from the building, but from a recoilless rifle located down the street. Our advance was completely canalized because of the nature of the hospital buildings and the fact that most of the private homes were surrounded by six-foot stone walls. To seize the capital building our lead elements would have to cross first an open street, and then 40-50 meters of open courtyard. Early in the day, we attempted to dislodge the enemy with CS from E-8 launchers. Although the fire from the capital building lessened, we were still receiving a heavy volume of fire from buildings down the street. We brought



our supporting arms to bear and later, under the cover of CS from the E-8 launchers, we assaulted the building complex and seized it with only light casualties. The enemy fled the building and we found both weapons and gas masks that he had dropped. The CS and smoke that we used in the street provided excellent cover for our attacking unit.

We later found CS grenades very effective in clearing out enemy bunkers. Often, when a bunker was attacked, all fire would cease from it, but the enemy remained within, just stunned by our heavy volume of fire. Initially, we would toss a grenade into the bunker, but found that this did not always eliminate the defenders and the first Marine into the bunker often came eyeball to eyeball with a live enemy soldier. We then began

Marines, wearing gas masks, move out to begin a house-to-house search.



to toss in CS grenades and found it drove the enemy from the bunker, tears streaming from his eyes. This gave us prisoners, which our S-2 needed badly, and saved on our frag grenades which were in very short supply.

► As I have previously indicated, we used smoke (any color) initially as cover for crossing streets. We found, however, that the NVA had already laid their automatic weapons to provide grazing fire on the streets from positions a few blocks away. They simply fired into the smoke because they knew we used it as cover. Our reaction was to throw smoke grenades into the street to draw fire. We then pinpointed the fire and used our direct fire weapons to suppress their fire. We usually moved under the cover of the smoke and dust caused by the direct fire weapons.

The next area that comes to mind concerning lessons learned is control. Of all the problems you face when fighting in a built-up area, this is the greatest. You have seen the cartoon about fighting in built-up areas where one Marine charges in one door and a second Marine through another and have a shoot-out because of the lack of control. Well, this actually happens, and did happen in Hue.

► When your small unit leaders lose control, and you lose control, this type of thing occurs. You must have strict adherence to the principles of control and coordination between adjacent units. You must be able to decentralize this control down to the squad and fire team level. Additionally, your control efforts will be greatly hampered by your lack of visibility in a built-up area.

An interesting sidelight to the control problem is the map that we used in the southern portion of the city. It was an Esso road map, very similar to the type handed out in Washington, D.C. for use by tourists. One side pictured all the historical and government buildings, showing their shape and location with a number designation for each one. The map index, of course, listed the name, by number, of each building. This proved invaluable because the frontline company commanders, with the battalion commander monitoring, could tell exactly where each unit was located. Hotel Six could tell Fox Six that he was in building 68; while Fox Six could reply that he was in building 67; and everybody knew exactly where the other unit was located.

To assist control, we developed another procedure which worked very well. We found that the company command group was much too large to follow the company commander as he attempted to assess the situation of his forward units. With the addition of an extra PRC-25 radio, we established a CP Rear under the command of the Company Gunny (we had no company XO). The CP Forward consisted of the CO's two radio operators and a runner. This enabled

the CO to move freely, but he maintained quick access to anyone of his supporting arms forward observers via the extra radio.

► Finally, a major problem area that we faced was that of refugees. There are three areas that should be considered when we discuss the control of civilians. 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.

One evening during the battle we had held up about 1700 and were preparing night defensive positions. We were drawn up in a square perimeter, since we were slightly ahead of Company F on our left flank. A platoon from Company G had been attached to cover our right flank along the Perfume River. My first platoon was located on the forward edge of the square. The platoon commander called back and indicated that there were approximately five or six civilians across the street asking to pass through our lines. We knew that there was a heavy NVA concentration forward of us, somewhere on the right flank near the Yacht Club, which could partially observe our movements. However, the Company G platoon was in position and would be able to cover the flank. With this in mind, the order was given to have a squad cross the street and assist the civilians in moving through our lines. Just a few moments later "Hotel One" called back to revise his estimate to 25 civilians. "Fine, let's get them back." At this point, the enemy concentration in the Yacht Club began to take them under fire. Fortunately, the Company G platoon was in position to return fire and suppress that of the enemy. A few minutes later, I received another call from "Hotel One" again revising his estimate. Well, several hundred civilians later the building complex to our front was cleared of refugees.

There were five Americans within this group who, being quickly moved to the Company CP, gave us some valuable immediate information concerning "Charlie." From this information, we learned what was directly to our front. We only wish this had happened more often.

► From these same five Americans, we learned that within the hospital complex, which was in the axis of advance, the VC were throwing the patients out of bed and were taking their spots. I'm sure they expected to trap some unsuspecting Marines who would be required to search the wards as we moved through the hospital complex. Because of this information the troops from Company G who entered the hospital were fully aware of what to expect from some of the "patients."

These are just some of the lessons learned by my unit during the Battle of Hue. Perhaps the best lesson is that imagination and aggressiveness are the best weapons in our arsenal. The Marines who fought the battle used those weapons. USMC