

## Hue City, 1968: Winning a Battle While Losing a War

by Maj Norman L. Cooling

*'Fighting house-to-house is the dirtiest of all fighting. . . . Just as a rat must be drawn from his burrow to be eradicated, an enemy soldier, burrowed in a building, must also be pulled from his hiding place to be eliminated. Normally, he will not come out without a fight. The attacker must go in and dig him out.'*

—Maj Ron Christmas,  
Company Commander in Hue

The battle for Hue City during the Tet Offensive of 1968 provides a useful case study for examining the nature of urban conflict as part of a major regional contingency. This 26-day fight for the cultural center of Vietnam was the largest U.S. battle in a city since that for Seoul during the Korean War. Americans have not conducted an urban battle since that has exceeded the scale of fighting in Hue. At the operational level, Hue was merely one operation in the American and South Vietnamese campaign to counter the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong Tet Offensive. Viewed in this context, Hue demonstrates the difficulty of shaping the battlespace at the operational level in response to a surprise attack in a built-up area.

### Strategic Setting

Located in central Vietnam, Hue is the country's third largest city, with a population of approximately 140,000. (See Figure 1.) The city is actually two distinct towns separated by the Perfume River. The Citadel, built on the northern bank, covers roughly 8 square kilometers and once served as the residence for Annamese emperors. In 1968, the southern side, about half the size of the Citadel, consisted primarily of French style residential areas along with the city's university and the French provincial capital. Located approximately 100 kilometers south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), Hue was the pre-

dominant cultural, spiritual, and educational center of Vietnam. Militarily, the city housed the headquarters of the 1st Infantry Division of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) as well as a compound for I Corps' Military Assistance Command, Vietnam

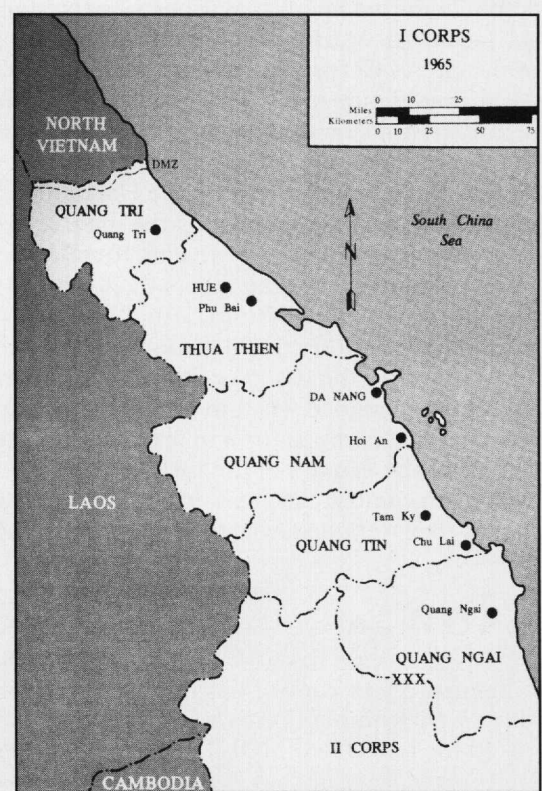


Figure 1. I Corps, Vietnam.

MACV) advisors. The majority of Hue's populace, however, remained aloof from the war. With their imperial heritage, most of the city's religious and intellectual leaders advocated strong local autonomy with an emphasis on traditional national values. They largely distrusted both Ho Chi Minh's Communist government in Hanoi and the U.S. supported government in Saigon.

The Vietnamese are an exceptionally homogeneous people. Their culture has been shaped by decades of Chinese oppression, French colonization, and briefly, Japanese occupation. Predominantly a rural, agrarian country, the French succeeded in establishing a major commercial center in the southern part of Vietnam centered on Saigon. Although there is a strong Buddhist and Confucian heritage among the Vietnamese, French colonization also implanted a thriving Catholic tradition. Tet, or the lunar new year, is the largest annual Vietnamese holi-

coastal plains as well as western mountain ranges. The 1st Marine Division, under the command of MajGen Donn J. Robertson, was responsible for the southern portion of the III MAF AO, an area that extended from just south of Da Nang to slightly north of Hue. This area was so large that LtGen Cushman divided the division and established direct operational control over both halves. Accordingly, the 1st Marine Division (Forward) Headquarters, commanded by the assistant division commander, BGen Foster C. LaHue, was designated "Task Force X-Ray" (TF X-Ray) and given responsibility for the area from the Hai Van Pass to the northern boundary of the division's tactical area of responsibility. (See Figure 2.)

TF X-Ray's mission was to protect Phu Bai, located just 8 miles south of Hue, screen the western approaches to the historic city, and keep Highway 1 open between Hue and the Hai Van Pass. BGen LaHue located his

headquarters in Phu Bai, where he had the 1st and 5th Marine Regiments (each with just two battalions) available to accomplish his mission. The Marines of TF X-Ray focused on gaining and maintaining the support of the South Vietnamese residing in villages throughout the AO by posting combined action platoons (CAPs) to live in those villages as an ever-present security force.

### Analyzing the American Campaign Plan

Like the earlier war in Korea, America's leadership viewed the situation in

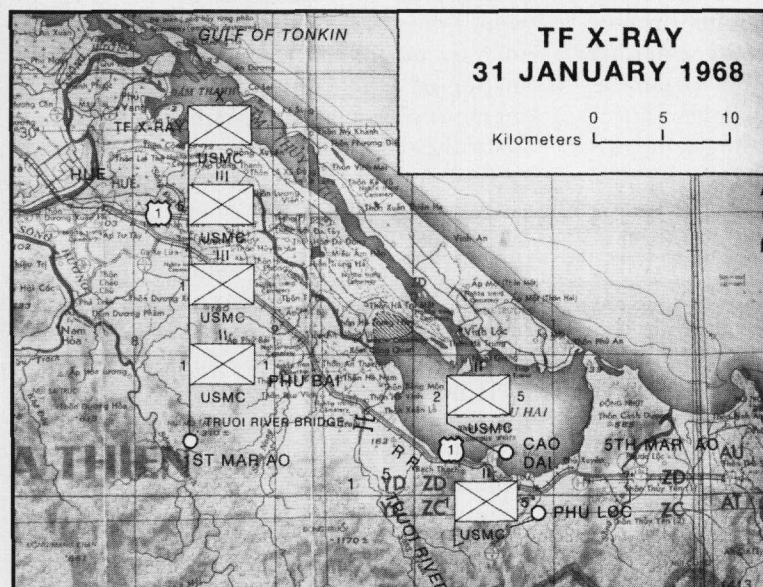


Figure 2. TF X-Ray dispositions.

day, and Hue, as the imperial city, hosts a prominent festival. By late January, several thousand visitors had arrived in Hue to participate in the festivities.

### Conflict History

Hue was located within the I Corps area of operations (AO) under ARVN control and commanded by LtGen Hoang Xuan Lam in Da Nang. While the overall American theater commander was GEN William C. Westmoreland, located in Saigon, the senior operational commander in the AO was Marine Corps LtGen Robert E. Cushman, commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF). Also headquartered at Da Nang, III MAF spread over 220 miles of eastern

Vietnam in the context of their Cold War strategy of containment. Specifically, the United States feared that losing Vietnam to communism would lead to the loss of all Southeast Asia. Moreover, this loss would threaten Japan and South Korea while undermining U.S. influence throughout the Pacific region. The strategic objective for the United States in Vietnam, therefore, was to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. This translated into an operational military objective of eliminating the effective North Vietnamese Communist insurgency in the Republic of Vietnam.

Notably, GEN Westmoreland and LtGen Cushman appear to have disagreed on the appropriate military strategy for reaching that operational objective. Westmoreland

viewed the conventional forces of Gen Vo Nguyen Giap's North Vietnamese Army (NVA) as the operational center of gravity. Westmoreland believed that the NVA's strength, relative to that of the U.S. forces, was Giap's critical vulnerability. In Westmoreland's mind, the key to victory lay in eliminating the NVA and the Viet Cong (VC) through search-and-destroy attrition tactics, a task he felt was well within the capability of the technologically superior U.S. forces.

By the end of 1967, the highly touted strategic bombing campaign had not produced the results promised. The Johnson Administration pressured Westmoreland to prevent further North Vietnamese infiltration. He intended to accomplish this by placing the NVA forces in a position where superior U.S. firepower could destroy them. U.S. forces would then attack west from Khe Sanh to interdict the Communist supply route—the Ho Chi Minh Trail—in Laos.

Unlike GEN Westmoreland, LtGen Cushman viewed the Viet Cong insurgent forces as North Vietnam's operational center of gravity. He identified the South Vietnamese support of the Communists as the critical vulnerability to attack. Accordingly, he focused on small unit pacification efforts in the villages, believing that only the people of South Vietnam themselves could truly expel the Communists and eliminate the threat in the long term. The celebrated CAP program was a product of this approach. In time, the differences between these two operational commanders caused GEN Westmoreland to grow increasingly concerned with the Marines' ability to succeed in I Corps. The friction between the two would also complicate U.S. operational planning and execution throughout the Tet Offensive.

#### **Analyzing the North Vietnamese Campaign Plan**

Ho Chi Minh and the Communist leadership of North Vietnam had long suffered under the French and the Japanese during their quest for one strategic objective—Vietnamese self-government. Now, against the Americans and the South Vietnamese, the objective became a single Vietnamese Government exclusively under their control. As part of a Maoist revolutionary war strategy, Ho employed rural insurgency and ambushes, complemented by an aggressive propaganda effort, to build a Communist infrastructure among the South Vietnamese populace. By 1967, he felt the time had arrived to escalate his efforts to the conventional level. He believed that such an offensive would spark a simultaneous uprising among the peasantry of

South Vietnam against its government. Ho knew quite well, however, that a conventional offensive was an all-or-nothing proposition with regard to fighting the Americans toe to toe. If they failed, they would be forced to return to Mao Ze Dong's second phase (guerrilla warfare) and would not be able to fight the Americans as a conventional army again for several years, if ever.

Realizing that American public sentiment for the war was wavering and aware that 1968 was an election year in the United States, Ho felt that an offensive was worth the risk. He recognized American confidence in the Johnson Administration as a critical strategic vulnerability. If he could discredit Johnson and thereby cause the American public to lose confidence in the war effort, he could eliminate the United States' operational center of gravity—its well-trained and technologically superior military power-projection capability. If he could not defeat the Americans in the field, he would defeat them indirectly. With the U.S. military out of the war, it would only be a matter of time before the ARVN Government would collapse, and he could secure his strategic objective.

Based on Ho's strategy, Gen Giap planned an offensive operation for the spring of 1968. The first phase, scheduled to begin in the fall of 1967, would be a series of probing attacks to test American defenses and resolve. Phase II, now known as the Tet Offensive, would seek to simultaneously attack the weak points identified during Phase I. Since the Tet holiday was normally a truce period between the North and South Vietnamese, this would provide Gen Giap with a greater opportunity for operational surprise. Finally, the third phase would consist of a "second wave," to reinforce victories achieved during the initial offensive. Counting on propaganda and terrorist tactics to manipulate South Vietnamese public opinion, the second and third phases would generate Maoist conditions known as the "general offensive" and the "general uprising." Ho and Gen Giap believed that this upsurge against U.S. involvement would cause the American public to withdraw its support for involvement in Vietnam.

Hue played a significant role in the NVA campaign plan. The city was a key chokepoint along the critical U.S. and ARVN north-south line of communications (LOC), Highway 1. A railroad also ran through Hue. Navy supply boats used it as an embarkation and debarkation point for supplies moving to and from the ocean. Taking Hue would sever the American's LOC and prohibit the movement of

supplies from Da Nang to the DMZ. The NVA viewed the city as a weak link in the allied defense of the two northern provinces, which were oriented against an anticipated attack along Route 9. Accordingly, Giap directed two combined NVA and VC regiments, the 4th and the 6th, to infiltrate Hue during Phase I and attack the city during the Tet celebration. At the same time, other units would attack U.S. and ARVN installations throughout South Vietnam, to include Saigon. The 6th NVA's objectives included the ARVN 1st Division's Mang Ca headquarters compound, the Tay Loc airfield, and the imperial palace, all located within the Citadel. The 4th NVA's objectives were south of the Perfume River, and included the provincial capital building, the prison, and the U.S. MACV advisors' compound. The VC would carry lists of "enemies of the people" into Hue that included the names of various local and national government officials, intellectuals, soldiers, and their families, with the intent of executing them.

### Campaign Execution

Phase I of the NVA campaign plan was executed almost flawlessly, so that as they prepared for Phase II, the Communists were well aware of U.S. and ARVN force dispositions. Although U.S. and ARVN intelligence noted NVA movements and knew something was brewing, they were unable to discern the NVA's intentions. The Tet Offensive kicked off on 30 January 1968, with approximately 74,000 Communist troops streaming across the border into South Vietnam. Thirty-six provincial capitals, 5 of 6 autonomous cities, 64 of 242 district capitals, and over 50 hamlets were all struck within 48 hours. The battle for Hue began on 31 January. Despite the 1-day notice of the NVA attack, Hue and Saigon were largely unprepared when both were attacked on the second day of the Communist offensive. The commanding general of the ARVN 1st Division, BGen Ngo Quang Truong, however, did take the prudent steps of heightening his division's alert status and recalling his troops from Tet leave. In the long run, this decision likely saved Hue from being completely overrun by the Communists. BGen Truong expected the enemy to attack near Phu Loc in an attempt to sever Highway 1 south of Hue and deployed his battalions accordingly.

Viet Cong sappers had infiltrated Hue on 29 January while the two NVA/VC regiments moved toward the city with 7,500 soldiers. Around 0200 on 31 January, the 6th NVA linked up with its guides and at 0340 seized a bridgehead into the Citadel. By 0800 the 4th NVA had also entered the

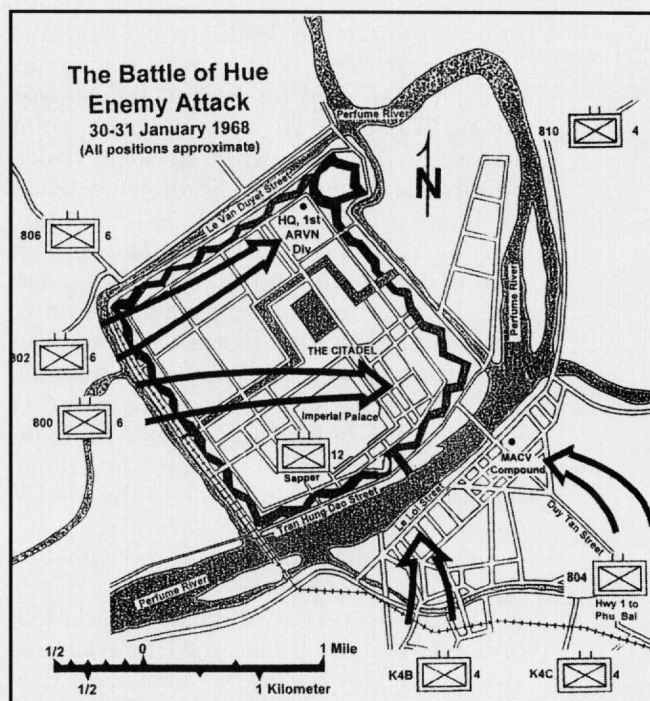


Figure 3. NVA/VC attack axes.

Citadel, and shortly thereafter the VC flag was waving over the Imperial Palace. (See Figure 3.) The NVA and VC captured or killed isolated pockets of U.S. and ARVN servicemen throughout the city, but Truong's 1st ARVN Division continued to put up stiff resistance. Within a few hours, the Communist forces seized control of the entire city with the notable exception of two key objectives: the 1st ARVN's Divisional Headquarters located in the northeast corner of the Citadel and I Corps' MACV compound on the south side of the Perfume River. The Communists succeeded in isolating these two forces from one another by cutting their wire link.

Inadequate intelligence concerning the attack initially prompted TF X-Ray to dispatch a single rifle company, Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (1/1), to relieve the U.S. and ARVN forces under siege. Company A moved north to Hue from Phu Bai along Highway 1, linking up with four M48 tanks along the way. Since the VC were unsuccessful in their initial attempts to drop the An Cuu Bridge, Company A was able to cross over the Phu Cam Canal before they came under attack just short of the MACV complex. With Company A pinned down, BGen LaHue attached Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines (2/5) to LtCol Marcus J. Gravel, the commander of 1/1, and dispatched him to Hue as well.

Upon linking up, the two companies continued their assault to reach the MACV compound, where they immediately took up po-

sitions around the headquarters and the Navy's boat ramp on the river. Simultaneously, they secured the base of the Nguyen Hoang Bridge, the Highway 1 crossing point across the Perfume River to the Citadel. Shortly thereafter, III MAF directed BGen LaHue to order Company A, 1/1 and Company G, 2/5 to cross the river and link up with BGen Troung in the ARVN headquarters. To everyone on the ground, this order was a clear indication that III MAF was out of touch with the reality of the situation. Nonetheless, LtCol Gravel sent Company G to secure the bridge. In a 2-hour firefight, Company G succeeded in taking the bridge, but was forced to retire back to the MACV compound about 3 hours later when it became clear that they could not hold it against an enemy counterattack.

On the second day of the battle, III MAF ordered MG John J. Tolson's 1st Cavalry Division to deploy the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry to a landing zone (LZ) along Highway 1, approximately 10 kilometers northwest of Hue, in an effort to sever the NVA's LOC. The air cavalry fought in this area for several days, but were unable to disrupt the enemy and isolate the city. Thus, the Communist forces in Hue continued to receive reinforcements and resupply from the west. An additional five Communist battalions eventually reinforced the nine that invaded Hue on the first day. There were also two sapper battalions, which brought the NVA strength in and around Hue to two divisions. The weather, too, began to favor the nontechnical enemy by hampering U.S. aerial support. Nevertheless, on the second day,

Company F, 2/5, conducted a heliborne movement into the LZ adjacent to the MACV compound. TF X-Ray then issued yet another order to LtCol Gravel indicating the lack of situational awareness at the operational level. BGen LaHue tasked him to secure the south side prison building. As it was obvious to LtCol Gravel that the prisoners had already been liberated by the NVA, he successfully argued that the mission should be cancelled. The following day, Company H, 2/5 joined the forces in the MACV compound as another unit "piecemealed" into the fight.

In the morning of the fourth day of fighting, LtCol Ernest C. Cheatham, Jr., the commanding officer of 2/5, was at last ordered to move a convoy to Hue and assume command of the three companies he had fighting there under LtCol Gravel. The new commander of the 1st Marine Regiment, Col Stanley S. Hughes, whom BGen LaHue tasked to assume overall command of all U.S. Marine forces in Hue, accompanied the convoy. Racing through an ambush and into the MACV compound, Col Hughes established his command post, took the reins from LtCol Gravel and, still with no intelligence beyond that available in the MACV compound, issued an operations order to LtCols Cheatham and Gravel. Col Hughes ordered LtCol Cheatham to begin clearing the city's south side by advancing west from the compound generally along Le Loi Street and parallel to the Perfume River to where the Phu Cam branched from the river. He directed LtCol Gravel, with his single reinforced but casualty-ridden company, to move with 2/5 but along the Phu Cam in order to keep Highway 1 open to the compound. The ARVN troops available to Col Hughes in the MACV compound would mop up snipers and pockets of resistance, while caring for the civilian refugees in trace of the Marines' advance. (See Figure 4.)

Thus began the painstaking process of clearing Hue building by building through the prepared urban defenses of a determined enemy. Because every street constituted a prepared kill zone overwatched by snipers, the Marines were forced to employ ingenious tactics and techniques to attain their objectives. The learning was by trial and error, and it was costly. Accustomed to rural and jungle warfare against hit-and-run ambushes, the Marines in Hue now faced both VC and NVA troops in an urban defense in depth. Tanks were the only advantage in weaponry the attacking Marines had, and the movement of these weapons was greatly restricted by the NVA's use of B-40

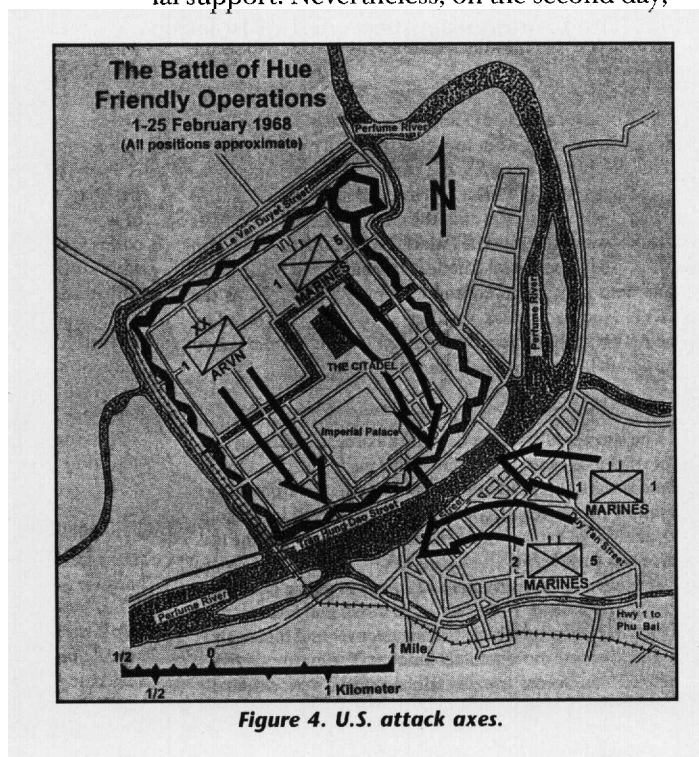


Figure 4. U.S. attack axes.

antiarmor rockets. Restrictive U.S. rules of engagement (ROE) precluded the employment of aircraft munitions, naval surface fires, and artillery (despite the fact that the ARVN were directing their own Skyraider aircraft to attack targets within the Citadel). To advance, small infantry teams worked with tanks and 106mm recoilless rifles to generate routes through walls and buildings, while M42, 40mm self-propelled antiaircraft weapons and mortars provided direct and indirect suppressive fires. Unfortunately, these tactics were unable to prevent high American casualty rates.

On several occasions during the street fighting, the Marines assaulted buildings filled with noncombatants who were used as shields by the Communist forces. U.S. tactical commanders implemented more restrictive, onscene ROE accordingly; the NVA and VC, on the other hand, did not. Both American and other international media representatives moved throughout the city, along with attacking Marine squads, consistently filming the actions of individual Marines. By the fifth day of fighting, Maj Ralph J. Salvati, 2/5's executive officer, acquired a number of E8 tear gas launchers and distributed these to the fighting companies. The use of this non-lethal weapon helped the Marines to force the NVA and VC out of buildings. In the open, the enemy could now be engaged selectively without firing into buildings indiscriminately and risking civilian lives.

The Marines methodically cleared the treasury, the university, the city hospital, the Joan of Arc school and, on 6 February, the provincial capital. Fighting by day and consolidating at night, Col Hughes was able to declare the south side of the city secure on 10 February. The Marines needed several more days, however, to completely sweep the area in and around the southern portion of the city of all Communist forces. In so doing, more Americans became casualties. Also during these sweeps, the Marines began uncovering the mass graves of South Vietnamese executed during the NVA's occupation.

Throughout the fighting, the civilian population remained essentially passive. According to TF X-Ray's after-action report:

There was little evidence of voluntary assistance to the VC/NVA. On the other hand, civilians volunteered no assistance to the Marines either.

Most of Hue's citizens had initially locked themselves in their homes, but now thousands began to stream into the MACV compound. Five thousand refugees gathered at the liberated Catholic Church, while another

17,000 accumulated at the university. When the mayor of Hue and the ARVN forces proved unable to adequately process and care for them alone, Da Nang dispatched a platoon from the 29th Civil Affairs Company to assume control of the humanitarian effort.

Since the Vietnamese refused to touch dead bodies, the Americans used enemy prisoners to bury the dead where they were found. Altogether, Hue had 2,200 displaced people to care for without adequate food, medical supplies, or sanitation facilities. To make matters worse, someone among the refugees or the ARVN promptly stole a significant portion of the emergency rations dispatched from Da Nang, beginning a black market enterprise even as the battle continued. Many refugees did not stop at the MACV compound, but continued to flee the city south along Highway 1, further complicating movement along the main supply route (MSR). Looting became commonplace. While some Marines were involved, the vast majority of looters were South Vietnamese, particularly the ARVN forces sweeping behind the Marines. LtCol Gravel so feared that the media would accuse the Marines of plunder, he warned American advisors to the ARVN that any ARVN soldier observed looting would be killed on sight. While this statement did not completely solve the problem, it did succeed in greatly curtailing it. Legitimacy remained a valid U.S. concern even in the midst of a conventional battle.

While 2/5 and 1/1 had been fighting for the south side, BGen Troung had been consolidating his 1st ARVN Division and fighting to retake the Citadel. After the fourth day of his counteroffensive, the NVA proved too tough to dislodge and BGen Troung requested American assistance. BGen LaHue subsequently ordered Maj Robert H. Thompson and his 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (1/5) to the Citadel. By late afternoon on 11 February, Thompson had consolidated three of his line companies in the Citadel via a combination of heliborne and utility landing craft (LCU) transport lifts. The ARVN intelligence picture of what was going on within the Citadel was vague at best. Since the NVA held half of the northeast and most of the southeast walls, BGen Troung directed the Marines to relieve his 1st ARVN Airborne Task Force along the 2,500-yard northeast wall and continue to clear that wall. Meanwhile, ARVN forces would focus on seizing the Imperial Palace and its adjacent southeast wall.

The Marines stepped off on 13 February, only to find the NVA moving into the positions prematurely abandoned by the 1st



ARVN Airborne Task Force. Just 10 minutes later, a meeting engagement began, and the NVA rendered Company A, 1/5 combat ineffective. With a full 2 weeks of preparation prior to the Marines' arrival, the Communists had hundreds of well-fortified and camouflaged, mutually supporting positions throughout the dense confines of the Citadel. As on the south side, NVA sniper fire proved exceptionally effective. Maj Thompson's estimate of the situation caused Col Hughes to argue for, and successfully obtain, an easement of the restrictive ROE. Maj Thompson then employed 5- and 6-inch naval guns, 8-inch and 155mm artillery, and fixed-wing zuni rockets along the wall, as well as riot control (CS) gas on structures inside the Citadel.

The fact that GEN Creighton W. Abrams, the deputy theater commander, established a MACV forward command post at Phu Bai on the same day likely had much to do with the decision to ease the ROE. With intelligence on 16 February indicating that the Communists were preparing to reinforce their troops in the Citadel, GEN Abrams hosted a meeting with Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky

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and LtGen Lam, the I Corps Commander. During this meeting, Ky concurred with the American assessment of an NVA buildup west of Hue, and stated his belief that the Communists were willing to sacrifice thousands of their men to win a slight political gain. Ky then agreed that U.S. forces should be able to engage the enemy in pagodas, churches, and other religiously symbolic buildings, and

promised to accept responsibility for any destruction. The following day, GEN Westmoreland met with both GEN Abrams and LtGen Cushman and agreed to place two battalions of the 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division under TF X-Ray in order to block avenues of retreat to the south and southwest, while the 2d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division pressed the NVA from the northwest.

Following 9 brutal days of fighting, 1/5 at last secured the northeast wall of the Citadel on 21 February. Yet, because the ARVN had failed to make much progress against the southeast wall and the Imperial Palace, Maj Thompson was forced to wheel his battalion to the right and continue the fight. His battalion largely exhausted, he turned to the recently arrived Marines of Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines (3/5). As Company L,

3/5 continued the advance, four battalions of the 1st Cavalry Division began a devastatingly effective combined arms assault against the NVA's supply installation established in the La Chu Woods just west of the city. With their primary LOC severed and with little hope of supporting their remaining forces inside the Citadel, the 6th NVA Regiment at last gave the order to withdraw on 23 February. On that same day, Maj Thompson's Marines rapidly secured the northeast wall and prepared to assault the final unsecured position, the Imperial Palace. In deference to the "host nation," however, the elite ARVN Black Panther Company made the final assault against very little resistance and replaced the VC colors with those of the Republic of Vietnam.

On 26 February, final mopup operations began. Again, as the Marines and ARVN moved through the Citadel in their final sweep, they discovered several hundred civilian corpses, all shot in the head. Apparently, in addition to executing those labeled as "enemies of the people," the VC also eliminated anyone who could identify their infrastructure now that it had surfaced as part of the Tet Offensive. The Communists took great care in their attempts to bury and conceal the dead. It took nearly a full year after the battle for U.S. forces to gain an appreciation of the true scale of the genocide. The South Vietnamese eventually recovered 3,000 bodies in mass graves around the city, while an additional 2,000 people were still unaccounted for.

At midnight on 27 February, the operation officially ended. Lasting 26 days, the battle for Hue was the longest and bloodiest of the Tet Offensive. A total of 3 Marine battalions and 11 ARVN battalions were eventually committed to retaking the city. Ten thousand homes were damaged or destroyed. The battle created 116,000 homeless refugees and left 80 percent of the historic city in ruins. Americans lost 216 killed and 1,364 wounded in action, while the ARVN lost 384 killed and 1,830 wounded. Some 5,800 civilians died, at least 2,800 of which were killed by the VC, who sought out and exterminated those with pro-U.S. sentiments as well as those who could identify them and compromise their efforts. The United States estimated enemy casualties at 5,000 with 1,042 killed.

The destruction of the culturally and spiritually significant city by military action was well publicized in the United States and had a significant impact on public perceptions. Clearly, Hue was a tactical victory as U.S. and

ARVN forces regained control of the city. Since the Tet Offensive was repelled and the North Vietnamese soundly defeated militarily, it can also be argued that Hue was part of a larger operational success. It is just as clear, however, that the battle was a strategic failure. The effect of the Tet Offensive on the American psyche was so dramatic that it caused the American public to lose faith in the Johnson Administration. This led to an erosion of public support for the war in Vietnam, an eventual withdrawal of all American forces from the country and, ultimately, the defeat of South Vietnam.

### **Operational-Level Assessment**

#### *Command and Control*

U.S. and ARVN command relationships remained disjointed and confused throughout the battle for Hue. Even after the initial surprise of the attack, GEN Westmoreland failed to coordinate with the South Vietnamese and establish a single operational level commander in the area. The U.S. and ARVN units remained under separate chains for the duration of the fight. LtGen Cushman was initially too absorbed by the situation in Khe Sanh to focus exclusively on the problem in Hue. With both the ARVN and MACV headquarters cut off and isolated, LtGen Cushman and BGen LaHue lacked situational awareness of what was happening in the city, causing them to dispatch units to the city in a piecemeal fashion. The enemy took advantage of the slow U.S. response by consolidating their defenses and, eventually, dropping two key bridges to sever Highway 1. The lack of effective operational control in Hue resulted in haphazard and disjointed tactical actions. One officer involved in the fighting noted that "the lack of an overall commander resulted in no general battle plan and competition for supporting fires, air, and logistic support."

The lack of situational awareness at the operational level also caused GEN Westmoreland and LtGen Cushman to impose overly stringent ROE on the U.S. forces counterattacking in the city. The ARVN corps commander, Gen Lam, initially imposed strict ROE on the use of fire support in hopes of saving the historic city and preventing needless civilian casualties. Accordingly, U.S. forces initially agreed to prohibit the employment of artillery, naval gunfire, bombs, or napalm in the city. As a result, on several occasions Marines were forced to allow the NVA to evacuate their wounded at night without engaging them with indirect neutralization fires. In one instance, a Marine squad identified a group of NVA soldiers in a pagoda. Fol-

lowing the procedures, they requested a relaxation to the ROE to engage the soldiers in the structure. This request took 2 hours to route to the III MAF staff in Da Nang and back. By the time the Marines were told that they could attack the pagoda, but only with direct fire weapons, the NVA had successfully withdrawn from the building.

Ironically, at the same time this was happening, the ARVN forces under Gen Truong, located within the most culturally sensitive area of the city (the Citadel), were calling in their own airstrikes. Only when GEN Abrams arrived did the operational picture become clear enough to initiate talks with the South Vietnamese and adjust the ROE appropriately. From that point, the U.S. ROE became increasingly liberal and only the area immediately surrounding the imperial palace remained under tight restrictions. When U.S. tactical commanders believed that noncombatants were threatened, they tightened the ROE accordingly. Hue provides an example where it may have been better to provide a clear operational commander's intent for fires rather than rigid ROE. It certainly does little good for one belligerent (the Americans) to be under one set of ROE, while an ally (the ARVN) operates under different parameters. The primary purpose of ROE is to maintain the support, or at least the neutrality, of the noncombatant populace. In the case of Hue, this was not too difficult given the fact that the Communists were an invading force engaging in genocide throughout the city.

#### *Intelligence*

Operational intelligence immediately before and during the Tet Offensive was grossly lacking and resulted in the Communists achieving nearly total surprise. U.S. intelligence correctly identified a large enemy buildup along both the DMZ and the Laotian border. Unfortunately, it failed to correctly forecast the objective of these preparations. Flawed intelligence estimates caused operational planners to focus almost exclusively on Khe Sanh and the surrounding region as the Communists' objective. The American operational intelligence failure caused a disoriented defensive posture, great initial confusion, and inadequate responses to Vietnamese actions.

The primary sources of operational-level information were the 1st ARVN Division and Thua Thien Sector intelligence sum-

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**Refugees pass by supporting tank as it moves up the street during battle for Hue.**

maries and low-level agent reports. American intelligence knew that the 4th and 6th NVA Regiments were within a day's march of Hue prior to Tet and preparing for an attack. Yet, it completely failed to identify the intent and magnitude of the Communist offensive. It appears that no reliable human intelligence (HumInt) resources within Hue identified the several hundred VC who infiltrated the city 2 days prior to the attack in order to facilitate the NVA invasion. Collection measures improved only after GEN Westmoreland, LtGen Cushman, and BGen LaHue gained enough situational awareness through "employment by trial and error" to focus on Hue and bring superior American technology to bear. Only after 2 weeks were appropriate collection assets put in place and, by that time, U.S. ground forces had already gained the initiative. On 16 February, American signals intelligence intercepted an enemy radio transmission during which an officer reported the death of the Communist force commander in Hue and requested permission to withdraw. The officer was told to remain in place and fight.

Information dissemination was also a problem. On the night of 30 January, an army radio intercept field station at Phu Bai, just south of Hue on Highway 1, intercepted NVA radio transmissions indicating an imminent attack on Hue. Rather than relay the message immediately to Hue, the station followed the bureaucratic procedure of sending it to Da Nang for posting and analysis. As a result, MACV did not get the warning until well after the attack. Despite the fact that American forces had long been present in Hue, the commanders fighting in the city had to scrounge city maps from a local gas station and the police headquarters to augment the few they were able to obtain from the MACV headquarters.

Due to poor communications and information dissemination, it took far too long for the operational commanders to gain appropriate situational awareness. On the second day of fighting, BGen LaHue remained so confused that he assured a United Press International reporter that the Marines were in control of the city's south side. As author Keith William Nolan wrote, "The Marine command at Task Force X-Ray was separated from Hue by eight miles of road and by a wall of optimism, disbelief, and misinformation." Intelligence was so bad that a full 7 days after the An Cuu Bridge was dropped by Communist sappers, TF X-Ray still unknowingly dispatched a convoy of 120 replacements to Hue without the means to repair the structure for crossing.

By contrast, the Communist intelligence effort was so effective that their two attacking regiments were given specific target lists with over 200 facilities, government officials, and other individuals. This list was so accurate that it included the names and location of agents at an American Central Intelligence Agency facility in Hue, which even officers at the I Corps MACV Headquarters knew nothing about. The Communists focused on both active and passive counterintelligence methods, impeding U.S. and ARVN communications by cutting their land lines and making a concerted effort to ensure that their troops had no documentation or unit markings that would indicate their force dispositions. Nevertheless, in at least one respect the North Vietnamese HumInt effort may not have been much superior to that of the Americans. Placing too much faith in their own propaganda, the Communists appear to have been surprised when most of the citizens of Hue and the other cities and villages struck during the Tet Offensive failed to view them as liberators and assist in their efforts against the ARVN and the Marines.

#### *Maneuver*

Hampered by poor intelligence and unable to fully ascertain the situation in Hue, BGen LaHue elected to piecemeal infantry companies into the fight. This prevented a coordinated battalion-level attack until 2 days into the battle and undoubtedly cost more lives than necessary. The delay in force deployment to Hue allowed the Communists to solidify their defenses in preparation for the American counterattack. Since Hue was merely one of several simultaneous attacks conducted as part of the Tet Offensive, III MAF did not have enough forces available to isolate Hue by sealing off the 8-mile perimeter around the city. Some

authorities estimate that doing so would have required 16 infantry battalions. Nevertheless, the most effective operational maneuver during the course of the battle was the commitment of the 1st Cavalry Division to sever the NVA LOC into Hue. Short of completely isolating the city, this was likely the most effective maneuver that could be performed at the operational level.

Poor tactical maneuver initially had operational consequences as it produced excessive casualties. The Marines of both 1/1 and 2/5 were ill trained for urban operations, both having been committed to Hue following extensive jungle fighting. The learning curve was very steep. What the Marines lacked in formal urban training, they made up for with "the imagination, aggressiveness, and esprit de corps of each combatant." While the Marines were ill prepared for urban combat, it appears that the Communist forces were also unprepared to exploit the advantages of defending urban terrain. In several instances, the VC/NVA initiated urban ambushes on the point element of assaulting American companies instead of waiting for the majority of the company to enter the kill zone. Both sides were accustomed to jungle fighting and both sides learned as the battle progressed.

Moreover, while the Americans were unable to isolate Hue from the NVA, the reverse was also true. The NVA failed to seize their two most important initial objectives: the ARVN and MACV Headquarters. The Communists also repeatedly failed to demolish the An Cuu Bridge over the Phu Cam to cut the LOC between Hue and Phu Bai until the night of 4 February, 5 days into the fighting. By that time, five Marine infantry companies, as well as additional ARVN forces, had successfully moved to reinforce the MACV compound. Similarly, the Communists failed, despite repeated attempts, to capture any of the other bridges between those locations. And finally, they could not bring down the bridge across the Perfume River that separated the Marines from the ARVN forces until the third day of fighting. By failing to destroy the An Cuu Bridge and allowing the Americans to gain control of the Navy boat ramp and helicopter LZ near the MACV headquarters, the Communist forces could not isolate the city. As a result, American forces were allowed to prosecute the battle for Hue from the "inside out," while being assured of reliable logistics resupply.

#### *Fires*

Beyond the limited fires to support the 1st Cavalry Division's effort to cut the NVA sup-

ply line in the La Chu Woods, operational fires in support of the counterattack on Hue were virtually nonexistent. Operational fires require sound intelligence to facilitate targeting and, in the case of Hue, that intelligence was absent. The key learning point regarding operational fires from Hue was the necessity for the theater commander to make the appropriate weapons and munitions available to tactical commanders and to produce realistic ROE. By successfully negotiating an easement to the ROE, GEN Abrams shaped the operational battlespace so that tactical fires could be productive.

Airpower provides a case in point. Airpower played a relatively insignificant role because of the overcast skies and the highly restrictive ROE that were in effect during the majority of the battle. When these ROE were eased, however, close air support proved very effective in facilitating the infantry's advance in the Citadel. As described in TF X-Ray's after-action report:

On 22 February, four flights of aircraft, loaded primarily with 250 pound Snakeye and 500 pound napalm bombs, laid down a devastating screen of destruction in the southeast sector of the Citadel City. Advancing directly behind the bombs, the ground units were able to secure the final portion of their objective with a minimum of casualties.

Nonetheless, even after the easement of the ROE, the close confines of the city made the employment of tactical fires and combined arms especially challenging. Gaining accurate battle damage assessments from indirect fire missions was very difficult because the observer could rarely see the effects of the fires in the cluttered urban construction. Realtime satellite and aerial imagery may help to alleviate this problem in the future, but only if the information can be relayed directly to the unit calling for the fires.

Riot control agents greatly assisted the counterattacking units. LtCol Cheatham's battalion successfully employed CS gas to force NVA and VC soldiers from structures without having to destroy Hue's infrastructure. This assisted immensely in limiting both collateral damage and noncombatant casualties. In future conflicts, the operational commander will likely be responsible for approving the use of such non-lethal weapons and coordinating their use with the host nation or allied forces. Precautions and appropriate control measures should be established to ensure these agents are produc-

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**When these ROE were eased, however, close air support proved very effective in facilitating the infantry's advance in the Citadel.**

tive. In Hue, during the confusion of the urban fight, 2/5 employed CS gas without first notifying an adjacent friendly unit—Company A, 1/1, whose members did not have their protective masks.

Hue clearly demonstrated the value of direct tank fire in mid- to high-scale urban combat. The M48s provided critical support to the infantry by opening “new” routes—knocking down walls and obstacles and blasting openings to enable troop movement and casualty evacuation under cover. By combining the M48 tanks with the Ontos antitank vehicles, the innovative Marines dominated the close-range fighting along the confined streets of the Citadel. This technique was so effective that when tank ammunition ran out on 17 February, the advance had to be halted. While tank fires were correctly employed at the tactical (in fact, the small unit) level, it is critically important that the operational commander makes armored assets available to his subordinate commanders in these circumstances. In studying armor employment during the battles of Hue and Khorramshahr, one officer found that “armor dominance in the urban setting translates to a four to sevenfold increase in the application of combat power in the close fight.”

In the long run, the non-lethal fires were the most important operational fires that



***A Leatherneck of Company A, 1/1 moves out under intense enemy .50 cal. machinegun fire during heavy street fighting taking place in the old imperial capital of Hue.***

could and should have been employed during the Tet Offensive. The information battle was the strategic battle that U.S. forces most needed to win, both within South Vietnam and at home. LtGen Cushman's pacification focus was consistent with this approach. GEN Westmoreland's search and destroy philosophy was not. By focusing on superior firepower and an attrition-based operational strategy, while virtually ignoring the media, GEN Westmoreland abandoned American public perception to Communist propaganda efforts. As a result, despite the fact that the Tet Offensive was an overwhelming U.S. tactical victory, it was a strategic defeat. Had GEN Westmoreland made winning the information battle a central part of his campaign plan, things may have turned out differently.

Because of the rampant distrust U.S. leaders held for the media, they potentially failed to capitalize on an opportunity to expose the American people to the NVA's callousness by publicizing the mass executions in Hue. This failure may be largely attributable to the fact that American forces did not have a good idea of the scale of the atrocities immediately following the operation. At least one credible author, however, believes that the Communist genocide received little attention by the media because of the near simultaneous revelation of the My Lai massacre.

BGen LaHue made adequate psychological operations assets available to Col Hughes. Still, according to Hughes' after-action report, his:

Psywar effort . . . had little apparent effect on the enemy force. The tenacious fighting and 'hold till death' attitude of the occupying NVA forces was not one that was receptive to psy ops, despite the deteriorating situation that worsened every day.

Notably, though, Col Hughes added that:

Psy ops directed towards the civilian population was successful and played an important role in the rapid response of the civilians to assist the GVN [Government of Vietnam] with information and rebuilding or clean up efforts.

#### *Logistics*

Operational logistics throughout the battle for Hue was a resounding success, despite the fact that the NVA eventually succeeded in destroying the bridges along the U.S. and ARVN MSR (Highway 1), thereby isolating the city from the ground. The Marines surmounted this deficiency by using the LZ and boat ramp immediately adjacent to the MACV compound. The boat ramp allowed the Marines to effectively use the Perfume River (which is accessible from the South China Sea) as an alternate line of supply and

communications. Had the NVA succeeded in securing either or both the LZ and the boat ramp, the American logistics picture would likely have been much bleaker.

While the American forces had immense difficulty in caring for the several thousand South Vietnamese refugees in Hue, they performed the combat service support function quite well. Only on one day, 17 February, were the Marines of 1/5 forced to pause in their fighting in the Citadel due to a lack of both food and tank and 106mm recoilless rifle ammunition. An important operational logistics planning lesson is that both "wall busting" and non-lethal munitions must be made available to tactical units.

Logistics personnel skillfully employed mutually supporting air, land, and sea resupply means to keep the Marines fighting. The 1st Marine Division G-4, Force Logistics Command, Force Logistics Support Groups Alpha, and the Naval Support Activity headquarters located in Da Nang controlled this effort. Throughout the battle, over 100 ground convoys, many of which fought their way through ambushes, delivered critical ammunition to Hue. Both Marine and Army helicopters executed 270 medevac sorties to evacuate approximately 1,000 casualties while bringing in 525 tons of supplies—despite the fact that they were flying into a hot LZ. Sixty helicopters were hit over the city. Navy LCUs with Swift gunboat escorts brought in another 400 tons of supplies. As with the air and land routes, they, too, fought their way into and out of the Navy ramp adjacent to the MACV compound. Three LCUs were literally blown to pieces.

The fighting in Hue consumed an inordinate amount of ammunition—nearly 10 times the normal combat rate experienced during the rural fighting. Tanks alone fired 30 percent more ammunition than consumption rates specified for "heavy-intensity" combat in current planning manuals. In addition to what the various Marine units initially carried with them into the city, several tons of ammunition were sent in as resupply during the fight for Hue alone. This does not include the countless other units and engagements supported by Force Logistics Support Group Alpha throughout the entire Tet Offensive. The logistical picture, however, was not perfect. A flawed combat replacement policy caused at least one group of replacements to be sent directly into Hue without any training in the theater. At least one Marine died in Hue less than 2 weeks after completing recruit training. These 2 weeks would have included state-side infantry training, a flight from California to Da Nang, and another into Hue itself.

With regard to the NVA logistics effort, at least until the second air cavalry operation, the Communists' preparations were:

... sufficiently complete to insure adequate supplies of all types of ammunition and supply.  
... Prisoner interrogation indicated no shortages of ammunition during the battle, and indicated that resupply was constant and virtually automatic to front line units. The enemy developed regular and well-organized rear areas south and west of Hue in the nearby villages through which resupply was managed, and to which wounded personnel, prisoners of wars, persons freed from the Thua Thien Provincial Prison and numerous persons detained by the VC/NVA were taken.

The enemy carried very little food, apparently relying on the abundance of such provisions in the urban environment during a major holiday. Thus, with both sides assured of uninhibited supply throughout most of the battle, Hue turned into a logistics race that the NVA simply could not win. The Communist's inability to sever the American air, land, and sea LOCs likely cost them the battle.

#### *Force Protection*

While the American forces implemented numerous force protection measures at the tactical level, those at the operational level were largely ignored. The best operational force protection measure taken was maneuvering to cut the NVA LOC into Hue and thereby eliminating their ability to resupply their forces within the city. Making non-lethal weapons (in this case CS gas) available and successfully negotiating more liberal ROE with the host nation should also be viewed as operational force protection initiatives, since this groundwork made tactical force protection measures possible. Another significant force protection lesson is the danger in assigning forces inexperienced in urban fighting to battle in the city. Undoubtedly, numerous Marines lost their lives as they learned the intricacies of urban combat through trial and error. In many cases, their jungle experience only made matters worse. The operational commander must ensure that tactical forces assigned to carry out missions in an urban environment are appropriately trained and equipped to handle such a mission.

#### **Conclusion and Lessons Learned**

Since the goal of the operational art is to translate strategic-level objectives into tactical actions that are conducive to attaining those objectives, this analysis has purposefully in-

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**... numerous Marines lost their lives as they learned the intricacies of urban combat through trial and error.**

cluded significant detail on the tactical and strategic details of the battle for Hue. Additionally, Hue demonstrates the tendency for urban operations to cause the levels of war to blend. Thus, without strategic and tactical detail, it would be difficult to justify listing operational lessons learned from the battle that specifically pertain to urban conflict. This case study suggests that these lessons include:

- The principle of unity of command is of increased importance in urban areas. A single operational commander should be designated to command the fight within large, significant cities. The commander must position himself and structure his command and control architecture to maintain situational awareness in order to synchronize tactical elements spread throughout the urban infrastructure.
- The operational commander should coordinate realistic and consistent ROE with the host nation based on an awareness of the nature of the fight in the urban area. The ROE must balance maintaining the noncombatant populace's neutrality by preventing unnecessary casualties and infrastructure damage, with giving friendly forces the ability to accomplish their mission without forfeiting their right to self-defense. In urban areas, where maintaining situational awareness at the operational level is exceptionally challenging, the commander should consider substituting a clear intent for fires in lieu of rigid ROE.
- HumInt is normally the most effective collection means in the urban environment. The operational commander should direct the development of his intelligence architecture accordingly. This requires recruiting and cultivating local informants throughout the theater of operations.
- The operational commander should maneuver to isolate his urban adversary from his base of support by locating and inter-

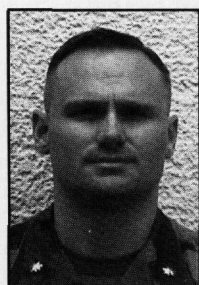
dicting his LOCs and MSRs. In some instances, this may preclude the necessity of committing tactical forces to an urban clearing operation altogether. Likewise, the commander should direct fires that target enemy LOCs into and within urban areas to further isolate the enemy from their base(s) of support.

- Where possible, the operational commander should commit only those tactical forces to the urban fight that are specifically trained, equipped, and organized for conducting operations in that environment. Individual combat replacements should likewise be properly trained and equipped. The operational commander should also ensure that his tactical units have weapons and equipment that are appropriate for urban combat. Hue indicates that non-lethal weapons and wall-breaching munitions are particularly important.

- Information operations can be among the most useful operational fires employed in the urban battlespace. Engaging the media and ensuring they are aware of U.S. objectives and efforts to prevent unnecessary noncombatant casualties and collateral damage is critical to shaping the environment for tactical success.

- Logistical planning must account for timely sustainment of widely dispersed and heavily engaged forces. Multiple, mutually supporting lines of supply by air, ground, and sea are useful in providing this sustainment. Operational logisticians must also recognize that materiel consumption rates during urban fights can be as much as 10 times greater than those typically experienced in rural environments, and plan accordingly. Similarly, urban logistics planning must include provisions for refugee flow and care.

US  MC



>See p. 18 for bio.

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>>Note: This article was the introduction to a treatise written while the author was a student at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. There were three case studies included, the first of which, Hue City, is printed in this issue of the MCG beginning on p. 64. The other two case studies will also be published, as will the author's conclusions and recommendations.

## Training for Military Operations On Urbanized Terrain

by LTCs Roger L. Hewitt, USA(Ret), Douglas A. Martz, AUS(Ret), & Thomas K. McNerney, USA(Ret)

*'The future is not the son of DESERT STORM, but the stepchild of Somalia and Chechnya.'*

—Gen Charles C. Krulak, USMC(Ret)

Some wags suggest our military fights the last war best. That may be. Our current training comes from two models—first, the nightmare of Soviet hordes streaming through the Fulda Gap (or, conversely, down the main road to Seoul) and, second, the spectacular end run of allied armored forces during Operation DESERT STORM. Both are stimulating and exciting. They conjure up massive forces

over the beach, modern cavalry charges, and carefully orchestrated task force maneuvers following massive blue arrows on some map-board somewhere.

These possibilities inhabit the dreams and nightmares of commanders' hearts because they represent everything for which those commanders trained. There's only one problem. If Gen Krulak is right, they are unlikely. A much more likely and ter-

rrible scenario is prolonged combat in jungles defined not by trees and vegetation, but by concrete and steel—military operations on urbanized terrain (MOUT), also called built-up and sometimes complex or restricted terrain. No matter what you call it, it's a tough fight, and it's the battle Marines are least trained to fight, the battle that has the smallest amount of doctrine and the least training. That needs to change.