

# Charlie Company's Battle for Hue

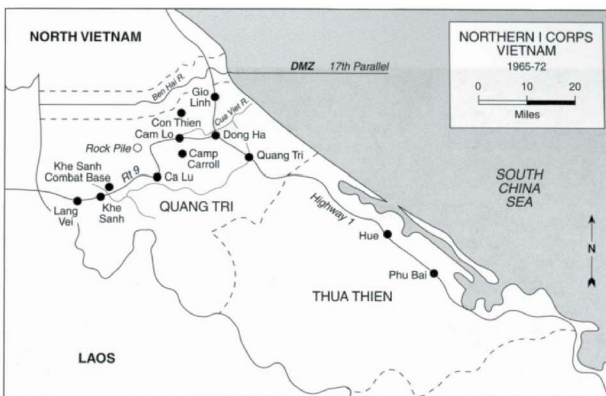
An examination of an after-action report on urban combat

by Luke Falkenburg

After-action reports (AARs) are standard practices for militaries and provide lessons for current and future generations of warfighters. This article examines one such tactical AAR from Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st MarDiv (C/1/5), during Vietnam's Battle of Hue by examining the event's historical context, pinpointing what the AAR successfully includes, and outlining the larger political and strategic considerations that impacted events on the ground, thus demonstrating the strengths and shortcomings of AARs at the tactical level. Overall, the operation to retake Hue City after the 1968 Tet Offensive offers insight into urban warfare and provides lessons learned for future operations in similar situations, such as the Battle of Fallujah in Iraq or Operation MOSHARAK in Afghanistan, and demonstrates that the Marine Corps has been and continues to be a learning organization.

On 31 January 1968, during the Chinese lunar New Year, elements of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Vietcong (VC) infiltrated the old imperial city of Hue virtually undetected as part of GEN Vo Nguyen Giap's Tet Offensive strategy. Local commanders, taken by surprise, failed to maintain possession of most of the city's allied installations. On 1 February, Communist units initiated methodical searches to apprehend Catholics, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops, American personnel, and South Vietnamese government personnel.<sup>1</sup> The NVA/VC's primary objective was to ignite a popular insurrection for the purposes of causing ARVN to disband and initiating a revolt against Saigon.<sup>2</sup> The United States

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**Northern I Corps.** (Map from Col Joseph H. Alexander, USMC(Ret), *The Battle History of the U.S. Marines: A Fellowship of Valor*, Lou Reda Production, Inc., Harper Collins, New York, 1997, p. 333.)

would then reduce their activity in the north and be forced to negotiate a peace on terms favorable to the NVA/VC.<sup>3</sup> However, the net result was 26 days of severe urban fighting, the likes of which had not been seen since the retaking of Seoul during the Korean War.<sup>4</sup> At the peak of the fighting, it is estimated that the NVA/VC had approximately 15,000 troops active in Hue.<sup>5</sup>

On 13 February, Marines were ordered to reclaim the Citadel, the barracks of the Presidential Guard in South Vietnam, after ARVN failed to complete the task, partially due to the

inadequate air and artillery support resulting from unfavorable weather conditions.<sup>6</sup> C/1/5 entered the fray at one of the few remaining installations in allied hands in order to attack the Communist forces internally so as to remove enemy forces that had captured major sections of Hue during the surprise NVA offensive.<sup>7</sup> By 17 February, and after only 5 days of combat, 47 Marines from 1/5 were dead and 240 were injured. It was reported that with escalating casualties, fresh replacements were frequently killed or injured before their names were memorized by

their squad leaders.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the fighting, some squad-, platoon-, and company-level casualty rates reached 75 percent or higher.<sup>9</sup>

At the end of the fighting, 9,776 of 17,134 houses in Hue were demolished.<sup>10</sup> NVA/VC casualties were estimated to be 5,000 with 1,959 dead, with ARVN dead reaching 384 and injured at 1,830. American forces suffered 216 killed and 1,364 wounded. Some 110,000 of Hue's 135,000 inhabitants were left homeless.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of the engagement, C/1/5 wrote a constructive and comprehensive AAR that summarized the lessons learned from the battle for Hue City at the company tactical level. Although it focused primarily on Marine infantry tactics in urban terrain (briefly including naval fire support), it remained unbiased, recognizing Marine shortcomings and displaying respect for NVA/VC tactics, while simultaneously displaying the Marines' improvisation, adaptation, and ability to overcome obstacles.

The lessons learned concerned many factors, such as the use of rules of engagement (ROE). Because of historic and religious structures in Hue, Marines were not initially allowed to use all the resources at their disposal, which severely limited their ability to dictate the pace of battle. Also, intelligence was inadequate, giving enemy units the element of surprise. As C/1/5 determined:

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 units. The combatant who knows where his enemy is hiding experiences a decided advantage in surprise and deployment of fire power.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the proper use of fire support was addressed (armored vehicle, artillery, air, and naval), providing battle-tested conclusions, such as, because of their high trajectory, the superiority of mortars compared to artillery in urban environments.<sup>13</sup>

The lack of proper military operations on urbanized terrain (MOUT) training prior to Hue forced C/1/5, accustomed to jungle warfare, to develop



Marines carry a wounded buddy out of the line of fire. (Photo from Alexander)

tactics while engaged, reinforcing the timeless lesson that training is essential to success. The AAR states:

Entry techniques, room search, clearing techniques, voice commands, fire discipline, supporting fires, communications must be rehearsed and improved until they are second nature.<sup>14</sup>

The Marines displayed their ability to learn and adapt, such as in their use of streets and alleys as firing lanes and the adoption of smoke as cover to cross open areas, and issues dealing with noncombatants. One clear lesson learned came after several weeks of urban combat in which an approximate 50 percent casualties were suffered; Charlie Company shot off CS gas (commonly referred to as tear gas) and 1/5, in roughly 3 hours, retook the final 12 blocks without losing a single Marine.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the importance of disseminating operational details down to the fire team level was outlined. During Operation HUE CITY, C/1/5 lost all of its officers except two, staff sergeants be-

came platoon commanders, and privates first class were squad leaders.<sup>16</sup> In short, to retain the initiative in urban conflict situations, "command and control needs to be understood at every level down to the basic Marine."<sup>17</sup> Also, the inability of commanders to see the battlefield at Hue illustrated the urgency for command to be given to small unit leaders so that proper coordination of fire and maneuver was exercised and that required adjustments were implemented in a timely fashion as the need arose.<sup>18</sup>

However, C/1/5 declined to mention several critical factors that directly correlated with its level of combat effectiveness. First, it neglected to address some tactical factors, such as the ability of friendly Vietnamese sympathizers to serve as guides and interpreters.<sup>19</sup> Also, the logistics of resupply and air support is hardly mentioned besides declarations such as, "urban terrain is not forgiving to helicopters that may be forced to make an emergency landing."<sup>20</sup>

Second, the AAR does not deal with the NVA/VC's history, campaign plan,

and overall strategy. These are not included to suggest that C/1/5 or any rifle company should or would comment above the tactical level in their AARs, but only that the absence of these critical components means a failure to fully and adequately explain the battle and its aftermath in their entirety. For example, if GEN William Westmoreland, USA, had fully delved into Vietnamese history, he would have seen the precedent for the Tet Offensive. During the first Tet Offensive in 1968, Nguyen Hue, a famed Vietnamese emperor and warrior, used the element of surprise to drive Chinese forces back across the Red River and into China.<sup>21</sup> Again, this was a mistake made at higher levels that had direct consequences for C/1/5's ground operations.

The NVA/VC hoped to repeat Nguyen Hue's success in Hue. Hue presented the opportunity to control a political, cultural, and economic hub which would dissolve the South's ability to maintain legitimacy, reduce morale, and effectively disrupt its capacity to wage military operations.<sup>22</sup> Economically, critical infrastructure was also targeted in Hue, as a railroad and major highway that linked the Marine Corps command at Da Nang to the demilitarized zone passed through the city, and the Navy utilized the Perfume River for its resupply operations.<sup>23</sup> It was also hoped that the failure of the South to hold Hue would result in reduced legitimacy for them, thereby mobilizing popular support for the North as the accepted authority.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the U.S./ARVN's capability and will to fight was to be destroyed, leaving the North to fill the vacuum.

Third, U.S. strategy was not fully addressed. Although C/1/5's assessment addressed intelligence at the tactical level, it did not confront intelligence at the strategic level. Intelligence unsuccessfully predicted or forewarned of the attack and lacked in its assessments of NVA/VC troop levels and objectives after the invasion.<sup>25</sup> This miscalculation in an inadequate deployment of forces and overall response for regaining control of Hue directly correlates with the high death tolls and the resistance C/1/5 met.

A strategy of systematically clearing Hue should have been implement-

ed only after successfully isolating the NVA/VC from outside resupply and reinforcement and establishing a strong foothold.<sup>26</sup> As Michael Desch states, "[c]ities that are descending into chaos must be isolated from the countryside and outside reinforcements, supplies, or sympathizers prevented from reaching urban centers."<sup>27</sup> Having been achieved, the NVA/VC fighting capacity would have been neutralized as supplies, ammunition, and reinforcements were cut off.<sup>27</sup> Initially, the United States failed to implement this strategy, and the NVA continued to be resupplied because GEN Westmoreland failed to successfully place a sole commander in charge of operations.<sup>28</sup> The lack of a commander resulted in an absence of coordination between the Marine Corps, Army, and ARVN, which had the disastrous consequence of failing to establish a cohesive battle plan, resulting in continued outside assistance being received by the NVA/VC.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, although it would not be expected for C/1/5 to address failures of strategic intelligence reports and disruption of NVA/VC resupply lines, these factors were an integral part of the equation in Hue and directly affected C/1/5's ability to carry out its mission objective on the tactical level.

Finally, C/1/5's AAR does not address U.S. political objectives outside of the initial ROE restrictions placed on the company because of the city's historic and cultural importance. Politics were not mutually exclusive to events on the ground, and their exclusion fails to paint a complete picture of the significance of Hue. Although one of the main U.S. objectives was to contain the spread of NVA/VC operations, politically, the objective remained to ensure democracy prevailed in South Vietnam.<sup>30</sup> However, this preservation of democracy relied on the South retaining and acquiring political legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, which is achieved through economic stability, the rule of law, and providing security for its citizenry.<sup>31</sup> The NVA/VC successfully attacked this legitimacy, which made the retaking of Hue essential for the South to prevent negative momentum being gained by the enemy. Therefore:

... [t]he denial or capture of these centers [such as Hue] may yield decisive psychological advantages that frequently determine the success or failure of the larger conflict.<sup>32</sup>

However, the manner in which forces respond to such disturbance is important because military responses also send a political statement. In the case of Hue, the statement was of the "credibility of American commitments and nature of American policy."<sup>33</sup> This political message can be directed domestically, especially in a globally connected world, and the political costs from civilian and military casualties were not addressed in C/1/5's assessment, nor would they have any way of knowing these long-term effects on subsequent operations at the time of the AAR's writing. This is not to say C/1/5 was in any way responsible for analyzing Hue at this political level, but instead only demonstrates the importance of the links between the two to illustrate Hue's significance on the macro level. Hue was a revolutionary phenomenon for the media, as it was the first time in history that a battle could be viewed by Americans sitting in the comfort of their homes. Therefore, despite being a tactical accomplishment for the United States and its South Vietnamese allies, it was a strategic victory for Hanoi as it achieved the goal of making Americans question the costs of war.<sup>34</sup>

C/1/5's AAR did little to explain the strategic and political objective involved with Hue, although, as previously mentioned, it must be recognized that a rifle company should not be concerned with these issues while writing an AAR—it does, however, clearly show how politics and strategy can affect tactical success on the battlefield, which remains essential for militaries determining their grand strategies and relations with their civilian administrators. This relationship was illustrated by restrictions on ROEs due to political concerns. Also, the failure to have a strong intelligence structure and central command resulted in a poor overall strategy in dealing with Hue and allowed NVA reinforcement and supply lines to continue operating, which were responsible for the stiff resistance C/1/5 encountered. Thus,

shortcomings in politics and strategy sustained the battle and were responsible for increased casualties.

All in all, C/1/5 displayed the relevance of AARs to militaries as a means to prepare for future operations/engagements by learning from those past, especially at the tactical level. After Hue, C/1/5 joined Operation HOUSTON in the Phu Loc District in March to open supply routes to Da Nang along Route 1 before being relocated to the An Hoa Combat Base in Quang Nam Province and returning to jungle/village warfare.<sup>35</sup> There they primarily conducted small unit search and clear, rice denial, and pacification operations in the Arizona Territory, Base Area 112 around Liberty Bridge, and in the Que Sons for the rest of their time in Vietnam until withdrawing from combat operations in 1971, never again participating in the heavy urban combat they encountered in Hue. For example, Operation TAYLOR COMMON required 1/5 to stop NVA/VC infiltration from the Laotian border, where they repelled an NVA attack at Liberty Bridge and denied the NVA/VC units access to the rice harvest during Operation MUSKOGEE MEADOWS.<sup>36 37</sup>

Nonetheless, the ability to develop MOU tactics outlined by C/1/5 during Hue remains important even in contemporary U.S. conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where Marines found themselves fighting in urban environments. AARs at this level have nothing to be gained by injecting them with bias. Although some officials may benefit from a flowery and supportive AAR, failure to objectively acknowledge your strengths and weaknesses will result in high casualties or defeat on the battlefield. Therefore, the Marine Corps has learned and will continue to learn from AARs like C/1/5's to adequately evolve tactics such as fire support, develop MOU training, support small unit leadership, and disseminate information down to the team level to ensure every Marine maintains the ability to retain the initiative in the United States' future engagements.

Notes

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4. Robbins, James S., *This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive*, Encounter Books, New York, 2010, p. 181.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
6. Desch, p. 82.
7. Curd, Travis, John Mullan, Scott Nelson, and Nick Warr, "Lessons Learned: Charlie 1/5, Operation Hue City, 31 January 1968 to 5 March 1968," after-action report, available at [www.au.af.mil](http://www.au.af.mil), p. 7.
8. Willbanks, James H., "The Battle for Hue, 1968," available at [www.globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org).
9. Curd, p. 1.
10. Young, p. 217.
11. Robbins, pp. 193–94.
12. Curd, pp. 8–9.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
18. Taylor, Maj John M., "Hue: A 1989 Analysis," 1989, available at [www.globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org).
19. *Ibid.*
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21. Young, p. 216.
22. DiMarco, Lou, "Attacking the Hearts and Guts: Urban operations through the ages," available at [www.globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org).
23. Lawler, Andrew J., "The Battle For Hue City," United States Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD, July 1999, pp. 92–93.

24. Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3–24, Counterinsurgency*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, December 2006, p. 1–1, available at [www.fas.org](http://www.fas.org).

25. Willbanks.

26. Taylor.

27. Desch, p. 85.

28. Cooling, Maj Norman L., "Hue City, 1968: Winning a Battle While Losing a War," *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 2001, p. 71.

29. Willbanks.

30. Taylor.

31. *Field Manual 3–24*, p. 5–7.

32. *Field Manual 90–10, Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOU)*, Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 1979, accessed at [www.globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org).

33. Desch, p. 84.

34. *Field Manual 90–10*.

35. Schulimson, Jack., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968*, History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC, 1997, p. 248, available at [babel.hathitrust.org](http://babel.hathitrust.org).

36. Schulimson, p. 437–42.

37. Smith, Charles R., *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: High Mobility and Standdown, 1969*, History and Museums Division, Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC, 1988, pp. 116–18. For those interested in 1/5's activities after Hue, refer to the previously cited Schulimson and Smith books. Also, Graham A. Cosmas' book titled *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: Vietnamization and Redeployment, 1970–1971* (Headquarters Marine Corps, History and Museums Division, Washington, DC, 1986) is an excellent resource. Some notable selected operations include Operations HOUSTON, HENDERSON HILL, TAYLOR COMMON, MUSKOGEE MEADOWS, FORSYTH GROVE, and IMPERIAL LAKE.



Read more about Hue at [www.mca-marines.org/gazette/hue](http://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/hue).