

# Reviews

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***Storming the City: U.S. Military Performance in Urban Warfare from World War II to Vietnam***, Alec Wahlman, Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2015, 368 pages, \$29.95.

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Combat in cities presents a significant obstacle to battlefield mobility. Yet, as amply demonstrated during combat in Iraq, it is inevitable that a military force will engage in a major battle within the confines of a built-up area. As such, it is an area worthy of study and reflection. Historian Alec Wahlman presents a case study that evaluates four major U.S. urban battles to “analyze American capabilities and explain U.S. performance in each. The four battles are Aachen (1944), Manila (1945), Seoul (1950) and Hue (1968).”

Each battle is presented in chronological order with a 10-part standard format that presents an overview of the operational context; the foe; the assault phase; command, control and communications; intelligence and reconnaissance; firepower and survivability; mobility and counter-mobility; logistics; dealing with the population; and a conclusion.

The introduction discusses the emphasis, or lack thereof, on training for combat in cities prior to our entry into World War II. Preceding the chapter on the battle for Seoul, the author examines the “presence of urban warfare in American military thought” in the post-war period. This is not a work that addresses each battle in detail. Rather, Dr. Wahlman investigates U.S. tactical performance at different levels – Aachen and Hue at the battalion level, the regimental level for the battle for Seoul and the divisional level in Manila. This provides the reader with an insightful examination of how command-and-control contributes to successful battlefield performance. Regardless of the level addressed, the author emphasizes throughout the work the block-by-block relentless ordeal of daily combat in an urban environment. Once engaged in battle, U.S. forces quickly appreciated the value of communications, firepower and logistical support to attain their objectives.

Dr. Wahlman’s clear writing style and logical subject development indicates that the “willingness of U.S. commanders to distribute assets to the infantry units on the line, and the ability of those infantry units to use those assets effectively reduced casualties and aided the advance.” Throughout the book, he cites many instances to illuminate his point. For example, firepower was consistently used in an improvised and innovative manner throughout each battle. Direct fire with 155mm howitzers in World War II and Korea was enhanced during the battle for Hue by 106mm recoilless-rifle fire and helicopter-gunship support. While air power played its role, armor was also an invaluable asset in each of the battles. Tanks acted as mobile gun systems to blast enemy fortifications. Dr. Wahlman strongly believes that the combined-arms team matured and solidly enabled tactical success in urban warfare.

Also, in each of the cited battles, there was an initial inability to isolate the city, which allowed the foe to continue to supply men and material to the fight. Once the target area was surrounded, the difficult task of rooting the enemy out of their entrenched positions continued at a quickened pace. The author emphasizes, “What carried them through was their overall competence in warfare, which proved transferable to urban terrain, and an ability to quickly adapt to the particulars of urban warfare.” However, the ability to conduct successful operations in the restrictive environment of the city is a perishable skill. To retain and enhance the knowledge gained required focused attention be directed to improving performance.

This was not to be. Between the end of World War II and the Korean action, there was a general paucity of doctrine and training areas to improve upon the wartime performance of forces in urban combat. “This minimalist coverage of urban warfare was not the product of some collective amnesia, but rather a reflection of the U.S. Army’s belief that urban warfare was a rarely occurring problem that was already solved.” After World War II, the Army had more pressing to problems to deal with.

Unfortunately, in Korea and Vietnam, American forces engaged an enemy who tested their determination to survive and win in urban combat. They succeed in both conflicts because, just as in the previous war, they exhibited transferable competence and battlefield adaptation. Small-unit leaders were aggressive and modified tactics and techniques to meet the new challenges. Higher commanders allowed their subordinates the freedom of action to employ their forces in a manner that best supported mission accomplishment. A responsive logistical-support chain allowed the swift evacuation of the injured along with a free flow of ammunition and supplies to the combatants.

Dr. Wahlman has produced a remarkably well-written work on the nuances of urban combat and the manner in which we have been successful in the past. Combat in cities is a nasty and difficult task that will tax any force. As such, this book makes a significant contribution to understanding how adaptation and tactical competency are the keys to success.

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