



THE BATTLE FOR HUE

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Between 31 January and 25 February 1968, a task force composed mainly of the 1st and 5th Marine Regiments, 1st U.S. Marine Division, fought to regain control of the city of Hue, the ancient imperial capital of Vietnam (Map 1), after the city was captured by North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces in the Tet offensive. The task force succeeded, in spite of some shortcomings, and its success was due primarily to its use of overwhelming combat power.

The story of the battle for Hue and the lessons learned from it are well worth studying. Given the world situation, these lessons may prove applicable the next time infantrymen—whether Marine Corps or Army—are called upon to clear an objective in urban terrain.

By the end of 1967, the United States had become polarized by the general situation in Vietnam. One reason was that the strategic bombing campaign had not accomplished its intended goals, and General William C. Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, believed that he had to find a way to halt North Vietnamese

infiltration. Toward this end, planners in the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) hoped to place the forces of NVA General Vo Nguyen Giap into a position where they could be destroyed by U.S. artillery and air superiority. U.S. forces would then attack west from Khe Sanh into Laos and interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the vital supply route for North Vietnamese operations in the south.

Meanwhile, however, the North Vietnamese had also planned an operation for the spring of 1968. The first phase of that operation, to take place in the fall of 1967, was a series of probing attacks designed to test the chain of command. The second phase, commonly referred to as the Tet Offensive, was planned to be conducted in the spring of 1968 in conjunction with the Tet holiday, the Vietnamese lunar new year. Immediately following the offensive would be the third and final phase, known as the "Second Wave." These last two phases would combine to create the conditions known as the General Offensive and the General Uprising, which the North Vietnamese believed would collapse the United States'

support for the conflict from within its own ranks.

In late December 1967, MACV set into motion a sequence of moves designed to realign units within the I Corps tactical area of responsibility (Map 2). A Korean marine brigade was to displace from Chu Lai to Hoi An, allowing battalions of the 1st U.S. Marine Division to begin advancing north. The division's 1st Marine Regiment was given responsibility for the area from the Hai Van Pass to the I Corps northern boundary. It would have the additional missions of protecting the base camp at Phu Bai, screening western approach routes to Hue, and keeping Route 1 open between the Hai Van Pass and Hue.

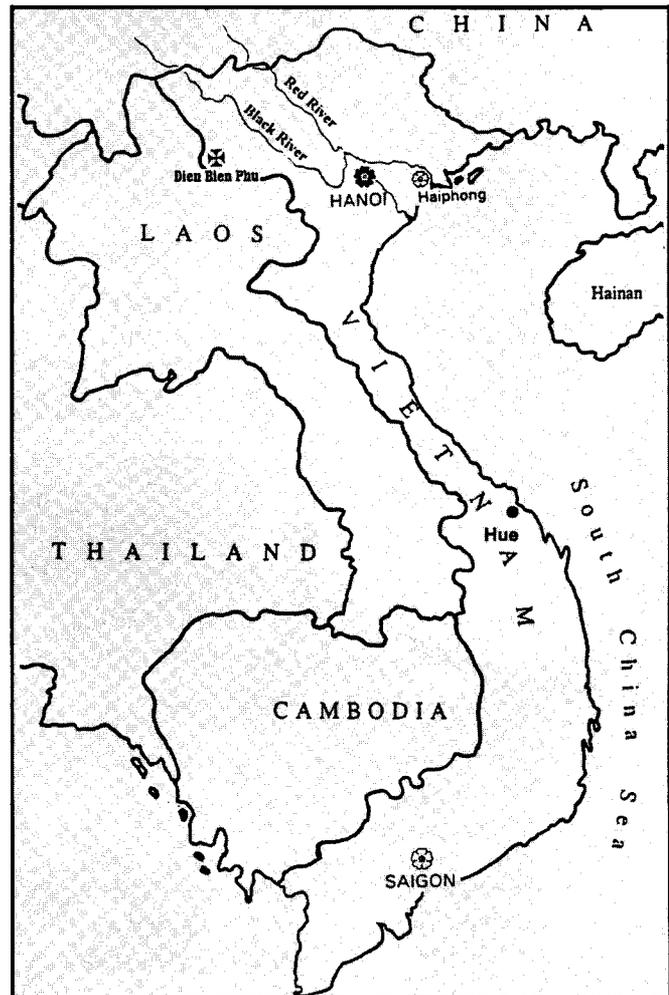
The city of Hue was divided in the middle by the Perfume River. To the north of the river was the Citadel, a walled fortress that once served as the seat of ancient emperors and that in 1968 was the headquarters for the forces of the 1st Army (ARVN). To the south were a former French colonial compound, Hue University, and the MACV compound (Map 3).

Logistically, Hue was a transportation center for supplies and materiel. Route 1 and a railroad line passed through the city, connecting Da Nang and the demilitarized zone. The Perfume River, which connected the city with the Gulf of Tonkin, had multiple loading and unloading points that would make it important in the event land routes became impassable.

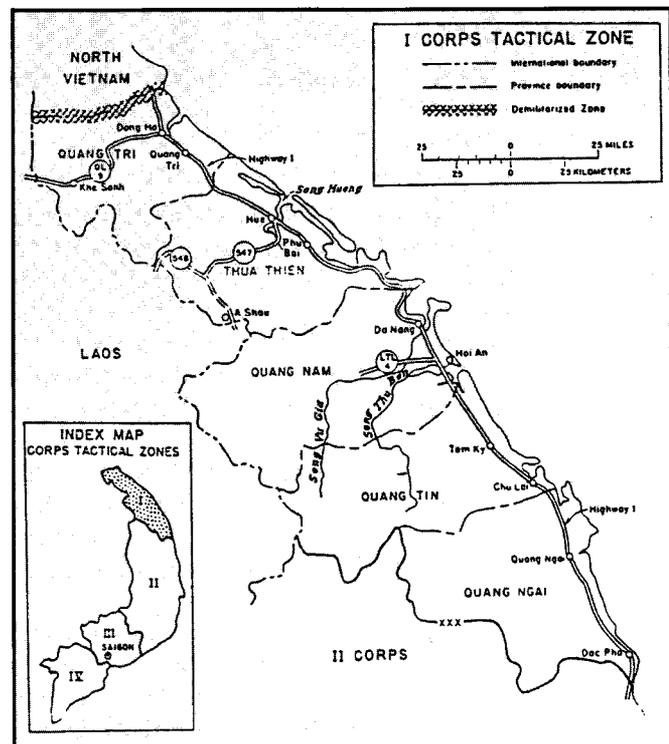
The Tet offensive began on the evening of 29 January 1968, when North Vietnamese forces launched attacks in many areas of South Vietnam, breaking a holiday truce that had gone into effect only a few hours earlier. Fortunately, Hue was not one of the areas first attacked, and the delay allowed General Ngo Quang Truong, 1st ARVN commander, to place his forces on 100 percent alert on the morning of the 30th. This security measure helped prevent the NVA battalions from overrunning the entire city of Hue when the attack came, at 0340 on the 31st.

The NVA had two major objectives in Hue—the 1st ARVN Headquarters and the MACV compound—and planned to attack these sites with up to ten battalions of infantry from the 4th and 6th NVA Regiments. The 802d NVA Battalion was to seize the 1st ARVN Headquarters, and the 800th NVA Battalion planned to occupy the southern portion of the Citadel. Meanwhile, the 806th Battalion was to establish a blocking position northwest of the Citadel along Route 1. Across the river, the 804th Battalion was ordered to attack the MACV compound while the NVA K4B Battalion would occupy the remainder of the city south of the river. To the south on Route 1, the 1st NVA Battalion would occupy a blocking position to prevent reinforcement from Phu Bai, while the 810th NVA Battalion would do the same along the northeastern avenue of approach (Map 4).

As reports of the attack on Hue reached Task Force X-RAY (the 1st Marine Division's forward headquarters) at Phu Bai, a reaction force was dispatched to reinforce the MACV compound. Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, loaded onto trucks and convoyed up Route 1 to Hue. As the soldiers of the company neared the city, they were joined by four M-48 tanks from the 3d Battalion, 3d

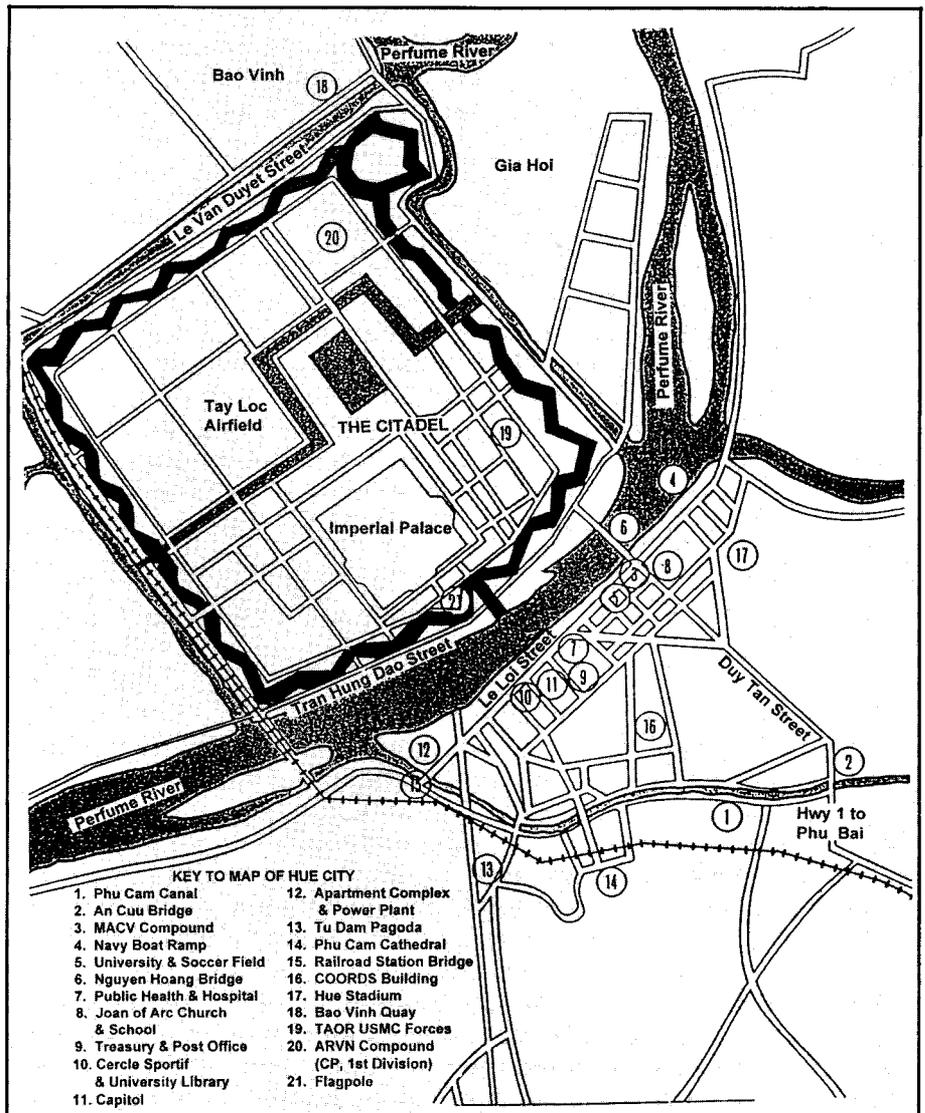


Map 1



Map 2

Map 3. Reprinted with permission, from *Battle for Hue: TET 1968*, by Keith Nolan. Published by Presidio Press, 1983. (This book is to be reissued in May 1996 in trade paper format.)



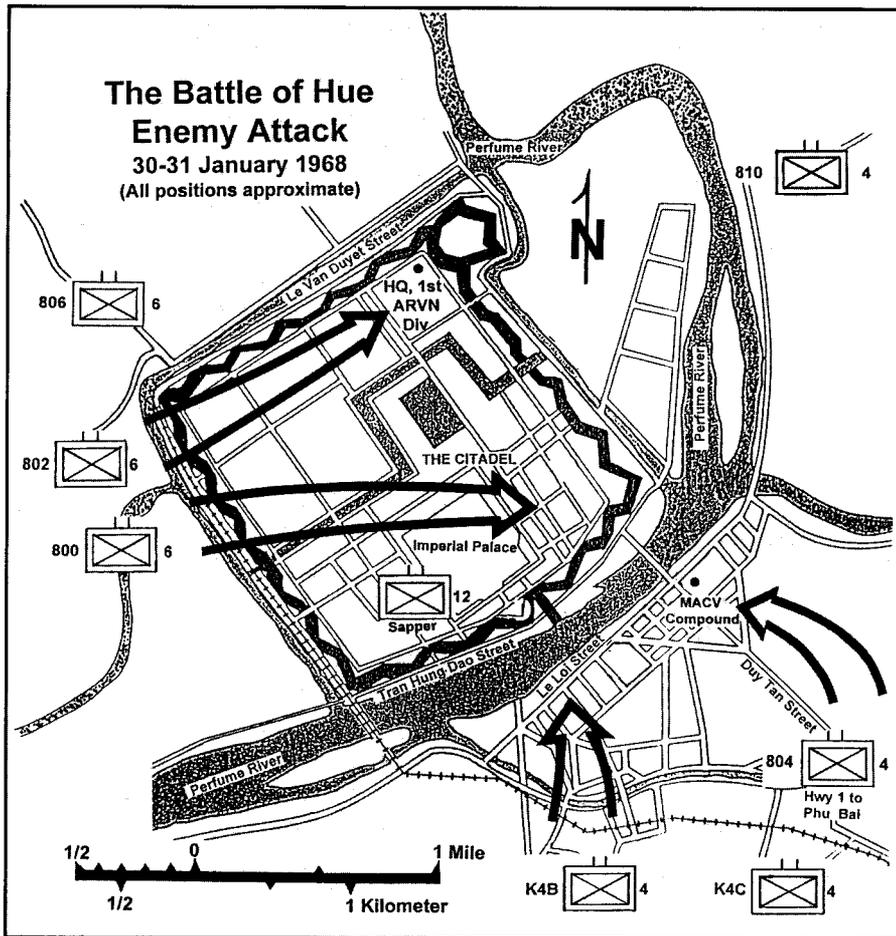
Marine Regiment. Just south of the Phu Cam canal, the convoy came under fire from the 1st NVA Battalion's blocking force, became stalled, and radioed the situation back to Phu Bai. TF X-RAY then directed the 1st Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Marcus Gravel, his battalion staff, and Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, north to relieve the convoy and continue to the MACV compound. Once they came upon the staggered column of vehicles, Gravel worked his way to the front and ordered the elements to push ahead to the compound and not to become decisively engaged with the enemy. The convoy, plus Gravel's force, made another mounted assault and finally arrived at the compound in midafternoon.

Once inside the compound, the marines reorganized their defenses and evacuated the wounded. Not long after the marines' arrival, TF X-RAY ordered Gravel and his companies to cross the Perfume River and link up with General Truong at the ARVN Headquarters. Gravel's plan had Company A of his battalion remaining in the compound, the tank platoon providing suppressive fire from the south side of the Perfume River, and Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, crossing the Nguyen Hoang Bridge enroute to the Citadel.

Halfway across, Company G came under intense machinegun fire but managed to secure the bridge. Realizing that this was as far as the company could go without suffering heavy casualties, Gravel ordered everyone back to the MACV compound. The first day of fighting was over.

After the initial assault, the NVA forces realized that they were not going to seize all of the city in one day as they had planned. Instead, the NVA brought in five more infantry battalions, raising the total troop strength to nearly 6,000, and began preparing defensive positions. At the same time, the U.S. Marines were desperately trying to reinforce the beleaguered MACV compound. On 1 February, TF X-RAY sent Companies F and H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, to Hue. This was just the beginning of the marine reinforcement that was to follow:

By the afternoon of 3 February, the order of battle was: Companies F, G, and H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, under Lieutenant Colonel Ernest Cheatham; Company A, Headquarters Platoon, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, under Lieutenant Colonel Gravel; and 3d Battalion, 3d Marine Regiment, and some quad 50s (a cluster of four .50 caliber machineguns mounted on a truck) from an artillery



Map 4

battalion, under control of the Hue City Task Force.

The Hue City Task Force was now under the command of Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, who had recently arrived from Phu Bai to take charge and regain control of the city. He called Cheatham and Gravel to his command post in the MACV Officer's Club and issued his operation order. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, was to clear Route 1 south from the MACV compound to the Phu Cam Canal, thus allowing resupply and reinforcement. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, would attack west along Le Loi Street until it reached the Phu Cam Canal. Once there, it would turn south along the canal and clear the buildings until it linked up with 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (Map 5).

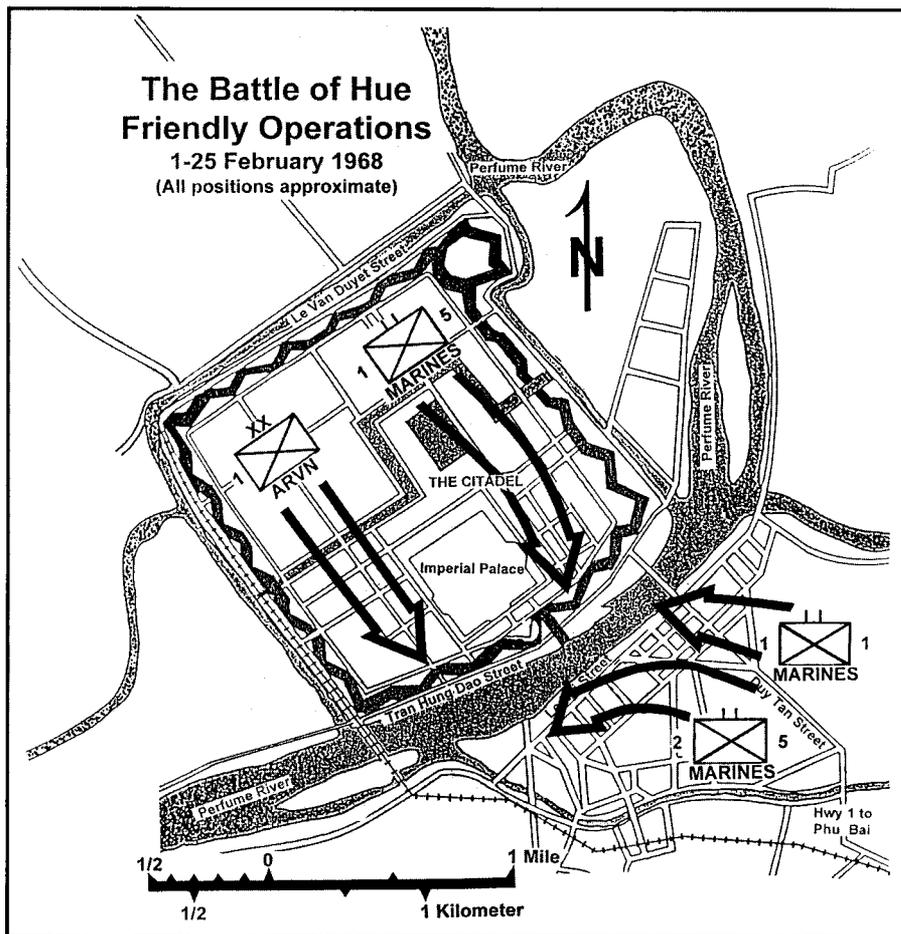
The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, kicked off its attack on the afternoon of 3 February but did not come close to reaching its intermediate objectives, the treasury building and adjacent post office. Instead, it occupied defensive positions and planned to resume its attack in the morning. Cheatham radioed his company commanders and gave them instructions for the upcoming morning attack. Company F would assault the treasury building and post office. Company H would seize the health building on the right and occupy a support-by-fire position. Company G, at half strength, would be the reserve.

Company H broke the silence on 4 February as it fought its way to the health building and began supporting the main effort. Company F's attack had withered in the face of heavy

mortar and machinegun fire. Something had to be done. Observing the company's predicament, Major Ralph J. Salvati, the battalion executive officer, scrounged some E-8 tear gas launchers, set them up facing the treasury building, and fired them himself. The NVA, not having any gas masks, dispersed immediately, and within a few minutes the battalion occupied its first objective. The battalion continued to attack west along Le Loi Street until the library, power plant, and capital building all fell to the marines. By 11 February, Company F had secured the apartment complex, along its western boundary, and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, was now poised to move south and link up with 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.

Colonel Gravel's element of 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, did not go on the offensive until 4 February. Its first objective was the Joan of Arc School, approximately 100 yards from the compound. The marines, using LAW antiarmor weapons and C-4 explosives, blasted holes in buildings and courtyards enroute to the school. Although its progress was slow, the battalion secured the school in the face of stiff resistance. Later in the day, it was reinforced by Company B and part of Company A, which had arrived from their positions in the Quang Tri province. The following morning, the Companies A and B began clearing houses along the rice paddy but met heavy machinegun fire. Company A called up a nearby M-48 tank, which silenced the defenders with its 90mm main gun. The battalion had gained 75 yards.

Map 5



The battalion kept pushing south toward the canal. The marines fought house-to-house, block-to-block, and then consolidated in a defensive perimeter just before darkness fell. Daylight brought the next house and more NVA fire, and this continued until 10 February, when elements from the two battalions linked up. The south side was now clear.

In the north, the 1st ARVN forces were having problems recapturing the Citadel. Finally, on 9 February, General Truong radioed Phu Bai and requested U.S. assistance. The following day the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, was committed to the battle, and its Companies A, C, and D began convoying toward Hue. The companies set up around the MACV compound and awaited their marching orders. Major R.H. Thompson, the battalion commander, was ordered to take Companies A and C and link up with Company B, which was waiting for them in the ARVN Headquarters. Together, the companies would attack south, forcing the NVA to withdraw or be trapped against the Perfume River. Also, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, was to retain control over 1st Battalion's Company D.

Later that night, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (minus), and a platoon of M-48s boarded landing craft and moved along the river up to Bao Vinh Quay, where it disembarked without incident. These units moved out to the ARVN Headquarters and linked up with General Truong. Thompson was then instructed to secure the northeast wall with his companies. His operation order had Company A on the left, B on the

right, and C in reserve. H-hour was 0800 on 13 February.

As soon as 1st Battalion crossed its line of departure, it came under tremendous fire from enemy machineguns, mortars, and B-40 rockets. Thompson committed the reserve, but with little success. Eventually, the battalion was forced to withdraw to its line of departure to reorganize and prepare for an alternate attack.

When news of these developments reached Colonel Hughes, he ordered Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, up to the ARVN Headquarters. Although the battalion made no progress on the 14th, and Company D arrived too late to make a difference, these units would later play a decisive role.

On 15 February, artillery rumbled and F-4s pounded the enemy as Company D readied itself for the attack. The preparatory fires lifted, and the attack was under way. The company made it all the way to its objective, the tower, and consolidated around it before dark. The following day the marines kept pushing south. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, succeeded in gaining some ground, but the price was high. Because ammunition and food were critically low, Major Thompson halted the attack on 17 February for rest and resupply. The resupply did not come, however, and the battalion was losing its momentum.

Realizing that his unit's will to fight was also suffering, Thompson came up with a plan for a night raid and briefed it to his commanders on the evening of the 20th. One company would seize a two-story administration building

300 yards away, and the rest of the battalion would use the building as a launching point for a predawn attack. The raid was a success and the attack enabled the battalion to secure the northeast wall.

The only remaining objective was now the southeast wall. With the newly attached Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment, Thompson set out to secure that wall on 22 February. Reinforced by three tanks, the company began its advance just after sunup. By 1300 it had reached its objective against strong enemy resistance and, the next morning, resumed its attack toward the Imperial Palace. By the 24th the battalion was poised to seize the Citadel, its final objective. Politics came into play, however, and Company L watched as the ARVN Hoc Bao (Black Panther) Company, reinforced by the ARVN 2d Battalion, 3d Regiment, assaulted and seized the Citadel. The north side was liberated.

Analysis

The success of the Hue City Task Force in regaining control of the city can be attributed to many factors. One of these was its ability to apply maximum combat power as a result of maneuver, firepower, protection, and leadership. An analysis of each of these elements illustrates why the task force was successful:

Maneuver—the movement of forces to gain a positional advantage in order to deliver both direct and indirect fire. Urban terrain naturally restricts maneuver and forces units to find alternate movement techniques. The marines quickly realized that forces moving along streets were extremely vulnerable, and they resorted to using LAWs and C-4 explosives to create their own avenues of approach to get into a position to defeat the enemy. Tall buildings are also key terrain in urban combat. These vantage points allow the occupants to observe and suppress movement with amazing effectiveness. During the action in the Citadel, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, used tall buildings as support-by-fire positions to reach its primary objectives. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, used explosives and LAWs to strike its objectives instead of solely using street maneuver. In both cases, however, maneuver played an important role in getting on or near the objective. Because the marines improvised and adapted, casualties were reduced, as well as the length of the battle.

Firepower—the amount of fire delivered by a position, unit, or weapon designed to defeat the enemy's will to fight. The Task Force at Hue delivered overwhelming firepower through various means. Tanks, close air support, quad-50s, mortars, and individual soldiers systematically destroyed enemy forces by concentrating fire on their positions. This superior firepower not only reduced the NVA's own fighting force but also combined with the psychological effect to destroy the enemy's will to fight.

The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, successfully used close air support at the end of the battle only after weather and political considerations allowed it. Likewise, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, employed the M-48 in an overwatch role as they moved through the southern portion of the city. As the tanks encountered B-40

rockets or were called up by the infantrymen, their 90mm main guns usually silenced enemy positions or forced a withdrawal. Firepower enabled the marines to destroy the enemy, even when they may not have had a positional advantage, or to prevent casualties when they became trapped. Overall, the enemy's will to stay and defend the city withered in the face of superior firepower.

Protection—the conservation of a force's fighting potential. The marines tried to protect their soldiers in a number of ways. Specifically, the Task Force prevented fratricide by consolidating into defensive perimeters during the night. In addition to being a control measure, this reduced movement, and the marines knew that anyone who was moving outside the perimeter probably was not friendly. Major Thompson delayed his battalion's attack for a few days because his soldiers were receiving inadequate resupply of food and ammunition. Finally, he risked a night raid to put his soldiers in a place from which they could control the battle.

Although often overlooked and disregarded, protection is important in achieving a unit's fighting potential. Needless accidents or sickness reduce the number of infantrymen out on the perimeter. The commanders within the task force did a good job of reducing non-battle casualties and fratricide, thus ensuring that their units would not have to be withdrawn because they had become combat ineffective.

Leadership—the ability to inspire the will to win. Leadership is the most essential dynamic of combat power. Leaders provide purpose, motivation, and direction during combat. The Hue City Task Force was fortunate to have excellent leadership, and casualty rates among the officers can attest to it. Leaders fired tear gas launchers, directed squads into buildings, were out front where their troops could see them, and accepted the same risks as their subordinates. In addition, commanders motivated their subordinates to keep pushing toward the objective, even if it was difficult. They came up with orders that provided direction, which allowed subordinates to use their own initiative and ideas. As a result, the Task Force was successful in regaining control of the city, even though combat in urban terrain is supposed to be decentralized.

The success of the Hue City Task Force in regaining control of the city was a result of overwhelming combat power. The marines brought all the elements together and prevented the enemy from responding with effective resistance. Although many of the enemy soldiers escaped back into the jungle, the marines overcame numerous obstacles, casualties, and political pitfalls to seize the city after 25 days of tough, close fighting and prevented the enemy from controlling the major cultural, political, and transportation center of Hue.

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