

# Lessons Learned

## Operation “HUE CITY”

### Charlie Co., 1<sup>st</sup> Bn./5<sup>th</sup> Marines/1<sup>st</sup> MarDiv

**RVN 31 January 1968 to 5 March 1968**

Even under the best of circumstances, street fighting is a bloody business. This was, in the end, the ultimate lesson learned by United States Marine Corps personnel who participated in this historical battle, considered by many to be the bloodiest of the Vietnam War.

The Marine forces involved in Operation “HUE CITY” lost 142 Marines killed in action during the month-long battle, including the initial fierce battles involving, primarily, fighting throughout the southern sections of the city, and the climactic full-scale battles inside the Citadel fortress itself. Hundreds more Marines were wounded and had to be medevacced on both sides of the river. Enemy casualty estimates range well into the thousands.

Although Operation “HUE CITY” will be long remembered as an overwhelming American / ARVN victory over the best conventional forces the enemy could throw at us, and although the Fifth Marines overcame very unfavorable odds and ultimately triumphed in the finest traditions of Marines in combat, in truth this battle was a very close thing. At the squad, platoon and company levels casualty rates were very severe, as high as 75% or more in some units. This was especially true during the first day or two of each unit’s initial experience in full scale urban combat.

The ultimate success of this operation could have been significantly improved, in our opinion, by several factors, including:

1. Improved (less restrictive) rules of engagement, including situational flexibility down to the platoon level.
2. Acquisition of improved intelligence data, in particular concerning the disposition and size of enemy forces. Reconnaissance and small unit probes to fix enemy positions are critical. ARVN forces fought the NVA for over a week (1 – 12 February 1968), on the same battlefield as 1/5 would fight, but no direct knowledge transfer took place between ARVN commanders and Marine commanders, at any level, prior to 1/5’s attacks on 13 February 1968.
3. Improved communication of intelligence information to all levels of command.
4. Improved supporting fire plan. Access to artillery, naval gunfire, direct fire from armored vehicles (tank / Ontos “killer teams”), and air support. All supporting arms should be judiciously deployed.

5. Significantly increased training for urban conflict (street fighting). Practice and preparation.
6. Deployment of available chemical weapons (CS tear gas) for offensive operations during the early stages of the operation.
7. Improved dissemination of operational plan details, down to the fire team level.

On the other side of the scale, 1/5 resoundingly defeated the NVA forces inside the Citadel fortress (despite being seriously outnumbered, the (initially) very high Marine casualty rates, and the resulting confusion created by the rapid turnover of officers and NCO's). Factors in 1/5's success during Operation "HUE CITY" included:

- small unit combat experience,
- individual Marine determination,
- the buddy system,
- the quick learning capacity of Marines under combat conditions,
- the combined leadership (officers, staff NCO's and NCO's) of 1/5 at all levels,
- and our ultimate ability to coordinate fire support and execute street fighting tactics under heavy enemy fire.

Certainly, using the 20/20 perspective of hindsight, this battle could have been decided in an even more timely and decisive fashion, reducing friendly casualty rates in the process, by paying attention to the fundamentals of planning Marine combat operations. Proper prior planning prevents p--- poor performance.

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The following details regarding the lessons learned from Operation "HUE CITY" are offered from former officers and NCOs of Charlie Company, First Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, First Marine Division, all of whom served in combat during Operation "HUE CITY", and all of whom were directly involved in the battle with NVA forces inside the Citadel fortress from 13 February 1968 through 5 March 1968:

## **Situation**

### **Terrain:**

There is an infinite variety of possible landscapes that will confront a Marine force given the mission of attacking an enemy force in urban terrain.

When the Tet Offensive was launched on 31 January 1968, and conventional NVA forces overran major sections of the largest cities in South Vietnam, Marine forces were, literally, knee-deep in rice paddies and jungle mud. Since first establishing beachheads in Da Nang and Chu Lai in 1965, Marines had been assigned the mission of conducting a counter-insurgency type of war. The Vietnam War was decidedly a rural conflict, and Marines were fighting, for the most part, a guerrilla army. The Tet Offensive of 1968 changed all of that. Suddenly and unexpectedly, for the first time since the height of the Korean War, Marines found themselves with a mission that involved urban combat.

Preparing to remove an enemy battalion that has captured a 40-story skyscraper or a college campus is a much different mission than getting an enemy squad out of a house, school or church in a small town. Urban combat is going to occur in large cities and middle sized towns, and each urban battlefield will take on a unique character and challenges of its own. The common factor in all of these variations, however, is that in all cases, *in urban combat structures dominate the terrain.*

Studying and assessing terrain is a fundamental and critical challenge for Marine commanders when planning missions. This is even more critical in planning house-to-house combat operations. Among many other considerations, building materials vary worldwide in their ability to provide cover against enemy small-arms fire to a very significant degree.

Through use of reconnaissance and intelligence, we recommend conducting a serious assessment of each building or structure that is within your unit's area of operations, because tactics involved in taking each objective (building, structure, etc.) may be different in each case. A small, wood frame house may offer the illusion of cover from small arms fire but little else; in some places walls are paper-thin. Even houses that use some form of plaster or concrete construction can prove to be unexpectedly porous at the worst possible time.

Know the basic layout of a structure, as much as possible, before entry. Approach each structure with an entry plan and a search plan, and make sure each member of each fire team and squad is well-versed in these plans. Establish voice codes and commands, and communicate regularly with each other. Consider entryways (existing doors and windows) to be extremely dangerous, likely locations for booby traps, and to be avoided if at all possible. Wherever possible, blow entry holes using satchel charges or rockets. Once the entry plan is finalized and understood, it must be executed with fierce determination. Be prepared for anything, and be ready to improvise. Be systematic, and check everything (basements, sewer access, attics, rooftops, trash cans) thoroughly before establishing that objective as secure.

The other aspect of urban terrain are the spaces between the buildings. Streets, alleys and other pathways are normal routes for humans, and therefore must be suspected to be under observation and possible enemy firing lanes. Whenever possible, take the most difficult or unlikely route from house to house.

Establish, in advance, a plan on what to do in the event non-combatants are found in urban combat zones, and for marking buildings that have been cleared.

Make absolutely sure that your Marines are aware that while inside a building being secured, *they are at risk from both within and without*. Always assume that every room, of every floor, in each and every house, contains enemy soldiers. Always move very quickly when moving in front of windows or doorways. Always know where enemy positions may be in buildings that are adjacent to yours. As in all Marine operations, watch your buddy's back, and run as fast as possible when traversing open ground.

Multiple story structures present an even greater challenge than single story buildings. In a medium-size village or town, or small city, that is dominated by one-, two- and three-story buildings, be very particular about the taller buildings, which are naturally used by the enemy as the "high ground." If possible, make entry to taller, multi-level buildings via the roof, and work systematically and thoroughly downward.

## **Mission**

The mission assigned to Marine forces during Operation “HUE CITY” was to attack and destroy enemy forces that had captured major sections of the ancient imperial capital of Hue during the surprise NVA offensive that was quickly dubbed the Tet Offensive. Due to the historic aspect of many of the buildings in Hue, the usage of heavy weapons was significantly restricted during the initial days of fighting on both sides of the river. As friendly casualties mounted, and as initial estimates of the size of the enemy force in the Hue City area was significantly increased, fire restrictions on supporting arms were ultimately lifted. In our respectful opinion, our ability to successfully complete the mission was, initially, severely and adversely impacted by the rules of engagement. As has often been said about warfare, we were our own worst enemy.

Although it is understood that mission and rules of engagement are not the exclusive responsibility of Marine leadership at the platoon, company, battalion or even the regimental level, it is strongly recommended that every effort is made, at every level in the chain of command, to ensure that a reasonable balance has been achieved between the demands of the mission and the affect of the rules of engagement on the ability of the command to perform the mission successfully.

## **Execution**

### **Reconnaissance and Intelligence:**

Urban combat is nearly always conducted at very close quarters. It is not uncommon to have opposing forces fighting from positions a few dozen meters apart; most of the fighting is done from a distance between 25 and 100 meters. Due to this close-in nature, it is critical to know where the enemy is and how they are deployed. This lesson was learned the hard way during the initial stages of the battle inside the Citadel. During the first two major clashes between Marine and NVA forces on the morning of 13 February 1968, the enemy surprised us and wreaked significant damage very quickly. This occurred mainly because we weren't exactly sure where the NVA were deployed. Although the ARVN had been in several major battles inside the Citadel, we don't recall receiving any intelligence attributed to them regarding the enemy's exact location. Further, to our knowledge, no Marine reconnaissance unit was sent in to check out the situation and identify enemy positions before we attacked.

We recommend that all intelligence assets, reconnaissance units, and surveillance devices that can be made available be deployed in a significant effort to fix the exact locations of enemy soldiers and units. The combatant who knows where his enemy is hiding experiences a decided advantage in surprise and the devastating deployment of firepower.

### **Urban Combat Tactics:**

The tragedy of urban conflict is that the "battlefield" for each firefight is a neighborhood; each objective taken, is someone's home, or a school or church, or some other structure that has significant value and meaning to the people who live there. Considering the possibilities, it is not difficult to imagine tank battles across mall parking lots; mortar fire hitting a church, a hospital, a community center; heavy small-arms firefights between homes; an artillery barrage on a school yard. While these images may be grist for the mills of Hollywood, when we think about them in relevance to *our* homes and *our* neighborhood schools and churches, the tragedy is somehow increased, made more politic. However, it is our collective belief that the life of one Marine is more precious than ten structures, one hundred homes, schools, churches, shrines, shopping malls, or any other building known to man. Buildings can be re-built, but once lives are lost they cannot be put back together by human hands. Therefore, all efforts should be made, using any and all weaponry available, to stun the enemy and support Marine advances through the use of supporting arms *and without regard to damage to buildings*.

At the same time, the use of heavy weaponry in urban combat is an assuredly "two-edged sword," as are many assets in modern warfare. Rubble can be nearly as affective as a building for protecting enemy firing positions. Further, artillery and other "flat trajectory" weapons may be somewhat restricted by the height of buildings and their distance from each other. In many cases, mortars, although smaller in caliber, are superior to artillery because of their higher

trajectory and are thus able to hit enemy targets that are screened effectively from direct fire weapons by buildings or other structures.

### **29 June 2001: Dale Dye's Urban Combat Tactics Update:**

Many thanks go out to Captain Dale Dye, USMC (Retired), President of Warriors, Inc. (the famous combat consulting organization to the movie industry) for his outstanding contributions to this white paper. Dale Dye fought with Hotel 2/5 on the south side of the Perfume River in early February, 1968, and then "dropped" to Delta 1/5 for the fight inside the Citadel. Besides the Marines of Delta 1/5, who fought with 2/5 on the south side of the river for several days before joining 1/5 inside the Citadel, Dale may well be the only U. S. Marine who fought on both sides of the river during Operation "HUE CITY." An E-5 Sergeant at the time, Dale was "officially" a combat correspondent, but says, "All I can remember doing during Hue City is changing mags and pulling triggers. Funny how that MOS crapola fades when the 'defecation hits the oscillation.'"

When asked to read and comment on this white paper, Dale offered the following: "Having mulled this over for some time now, I've come up with what I think will be valuable hints for the infantry small-unit leader to bear in mind while training his Marines for urban combat operations and for employment when/if the situation arises for real. All of these observations/hints are based on things I actually experienced or learned while fighting in Hue. By the way, I coined a military acronym for this stuff after deciding that MOUT (Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain) and FIBUA (Fighting In Built-Up Areas) just didn't fit the bill. In my view, we should classify all this stuff under the acronym FISH (Fighting In Someone's House)." Here, then, are Dale Dye's "21 Tips for Successful FISHing:"

1. **TACTICAL MOVEMENT PAST WINDOWS/DOORS:** Most movement in urban fighting tends to be quick and short. That's good, but it leads to ignoring the obvious at times. We had a lot of Marines killed or wounded – particularly on the south side of Hue – because they exposed themselves when moving past windows or doors. In general, avoid moving past doors (open or closed), period. You will have to move past windows, but BE SURE TO DUCK below the window level. Also, don't forget that many structures have ground level windows that provide light and ventilation to cellars or basements. STEP OVER THESE GROUND-LEVEL WINDOWS and do not expose your legs and/or lower body to enemy fire from within.

2. **SHOOT-THROUGH:** Our infantry weapons loaded with standard ball ammo have a hell of a penetration factor. As Murphy urges, when in doubt, empty the magazine! Be especially careful of stacks of furniture, desks, cabinets, armoires, closets, clothing presses, etc. when searching or clearing rooms. You can SHOOT RIGHT THROUGH THESE ITEMS and a couple of well-placed rounds may save your life. On the south side, I was right behind a Marine who instinctively put a burst of five from his M-16 into a large wall cabinet and was rewarded

with a dead NVA who fell through the door and out onto the floor. This technique rapidly became SOP.

3. INCREASED SHRAPNEL EFFECT: Don't get salty – or let your troops get salty – regarding helmets and flak-jackets in urban fighting. Many of our MSW (multiple shrapnel wound) casualties on both the south and the north sides of the river resulted from the increased burst effect of RPG's, mortars and ChiCom grenades that occurred due to flying masonry. Always be aware that HIGH-EXPLOSIVE TYPE WEAPONS WILL CREATE AN INCREASED SHRAPNEL FAN IN URBAN AREAS. A flying piece of brick, concrete or macadam can kill you just as easily as shrapnel from the actual weapon.

4. USE OF FRAGMENTATION HAND GRENADES: Up until we were committed to Hue, I noticed that a lot of Marines were reluctant to carry and/or use frags. Get over – and get your Marines over – this reluctance in a hurry! A basic load should be four to six frags per man before you enter the area. TEACH MARINES TO DELIVER FRAGS WITH BOTH HANDS. Also TEACH MARINES TO “COOK OFF” A FRAG before tossing or lobbing it into a room or a building. They've got four to six seconds on a standard frag fuse and that's enough time for a nimble enemy to retrieve and toss it back in your lap. This happened several times on the south side of Hue and at least once (with fatal consequences) on the north side. I like to count three, but two is sufficient, after the safety lever is released before delivering the grenade. I worked out a deal with a buddy where we would stand on both sides of a suspect window. One of us would pull the pin and release the safety lever; then toss it to the opposite man who would catch it and make the delivery. Safety Officers and NCOs may have a problem over this on the range, but it's got to be practiced! When heaving a grenade into a room or building, generally HEAVE IT AS HARD AS YOU CAN. The frag will bounce around off the walls or furniture and that makes it hard for the enemy to chase it down and retrieve it.

5. STEAL CIVILIAN VEHICLES: Every Marine unit operating in an urban environment finds itself in need to quick transportation, for re-supply, rapid troop movement, or evacuation of casualties. Naturally, there is no transportation available when it is critically needed. We learned in fighting on the south side of Hue to HOT-WIRE AND STEAL CIVILIAN VEHICLES. Emphasis is on “civilian” as military vehicles left behind by an enemy may well be mined or booby-trapped. Steer clear of the enemy's half-tracks, abandoned armor or military trucks in general. What you want is the family sedan or pick-up truck. In any Marine unit there is generally a character that has had some “previous experience” in this area. Find him, and use him. On the south side of Hue, this saved lives time and again. We even hot-wired several of the three-wheeled cyclo type vehicles and they worked just great for re-supply and CasEvac. I humbly admit to being one of the star players in this effort, which made me the go-to guy for Captain Ron Christmas commanding Hotel 2/5.



6. SUPPLY POINTS AND RALLY POINTS: Re-supply of weapons, water and ammo is always a problem in urban fighting as trucks or other transport attempting to reach the fighting units rapidly become prime targets. The solution is to ESTABLISH STREET-CORNER SUPPLY POINTS. Have your support people simply run the gear up and dump it on a designated street-corner or intersection. At that point, fire teams, squads and platoons can simply send working parties to the designated point, get what they need and bring it forward with no danger to the supporting supply pipeline. Also, ESTABLISH RALLY POINTS for lost troops or units. As you move a unit forward, pause at easily recognizable intersections, buildings or corners and let everyone know this is a RALLY POINT. If they get lost or lose contact with the higher unit, they simply find the rally point and wait. The platoon guide or a designated runner can make regular checks of these points and police up the missing people. This worked particularly well for re-assembling lost squads in the north side fighting.

7. RECOILLESS WEAPONS: The M-72 LAAW, the AT-4 and any other available recoilless weapon is extremely valuable in urban fighting for obvious reasons. However, it's important to CONSIDER THE BACK-BLAST WHEN USING THESE WEAPONS FROM ENCLOSED AREAS such as rooms, blind alleys, etc. I fired a LAAW from a second story window on the north side, and was extremely proud of myself until I discovered the back-blast damn near killed the other two guys in the rooms with me. The back-blast from a recoilless weapon will carom off the walls of a room and act like a miniature tornado!

8. COUNTER-SNIPER TECHNIQUES: Working in buddy-teams in Hue, we rapidly learned to play fox and hounds with NVA snipers. The generic problem was that someone got dinged before we managed to spot the shooter that dinged him. UNDER FIRE FROM AN UNKNOWN SNIPER POSITION ONE MAN WILL HAVE TO SERVE AS TARGET while the other man spots and shoots. We finessed this technique by selecting a short run to cover for the target or bait man in an attempt to draw the sniper's fire. If he moved quick and low from cover to cover, we would generally get the sniper to fire a badly aimed shot or burst. This revealed his hide and the cover man could deliver fire on the sniper's position or call for fire from the remainder of the squad by putting a tracer or two into the hide. TRAIN IN THIS TECHNIQUE!

9. FOCUS HIGH/LOOK LOW: In Hue we tended to focus on high firing positions for the enemy. He's an infantryman and he knows the value of the high ground, so we tended to look for him high. Unfortunately, this led to a tendency to ignore spider-holes and low-level fighting positions that frequently caught us by surprise. AN ENEMY IN URBAN DEFENSE WILL FREQUENTLY LURE YOU INTO COMMITTING TO AN ASSAULT BY FIRING FROM HIGH WHILE HIS SHOOTERS ARE DUG INTO LOW POSITIONS AROUND A BUILDING. We got nailed in the assault on the treasury and hospital areas on the south side by not checking the low-ground before we went over into the assault.

10. UNLIKELY HIDES: On the north side during the Citadel assault, I lost a man and nearly got nailed myself because we did not think anyone could be dug in under a pile of household junk. It was a pile of discarded crap with a broken bicycle on top, looking just like any other trash pile in any other city. Unfortunately, an NVA had dug under the trash-pile from the rear and made himself a firing embrasure at absolute ground level. NEVER PRESUME AN ENEMY CAN'T BE SOMEWHERE. HE WILL BE THERE.

11. SEWER AND DRAINAGE CANALS: Most of the NVA who moved into Hue on the nights of 30-31 January 1968 got into the city undetected by moving through Hue's sewage system and drainage canals. IN THE OFFENSE, SPOT THE MANHOLES AND CHECK THEM OUT. IN THE DEFENSE, EXPLORE THE CANAL/SEWER SYSTEM and use it to move troops from point to point. Marines should be trained to do this as a matter of course. Just as we designated and trained tunnel-rats for work underground in the jungle, we should TRAIN MARINES TO EXPLORE, MOVE AND FIGHT BENEATH CITY STREETS. *NOTE: Although I agree with Dale's assessment that sewage systems must be considered as critical terrain features and covered tactically, having visited Hue in 1998 I saw the sewers in that city. These sewers are only three feet by three feet, and are clogged to the brim. I don't know what the state of these sewers was in 1968, so this was a possibility, but I think most of the NVA infiltrated through the gates under the cover of the Tet holiday. WARR*

12. HIGH OBSERVATION POSTS: Rooftops are extremely valuable as OP's. A good man up high can direct fire and movement for troops below and save you a lot of time and trouble in spotting potential or real danger areas. GET AN OBSERVER HIGH AND WORK OUT A SYSTEM OF SIGNALS SO HE CAN DIRECT YOUR FIRE OR MOVEMENT. An observer with a magazine of tracers can be extremely valuable in this endeavor. In selecting the rooftop OP, don't let yourself get silhouetted. If possible, tear yourself a mouse-hole somewhere in the shingle and observe from there.

13. WEAK-HAND SHOOTING: Cover in urban fighting is most often what's available rather than what you would select. This makes it important that all Marines BECOME ADEPT AT WEAK-HAND SHOOTING. Learn to fire accurately – or at least effectively – from either shoulder, so you are not forced to expose yourself when firing from behind inconvenient cover.

14. USE COVER: Obviously, you should hug walls rather than moving down the center of an alley or street. On the north side of Hue, we found ourselves advancing up streets adjacent to the Citadel walls by rushing from doorway to doorway, which minimized our exposure to fire from the walls. Unfortunately, this left us with our backs to doors very often, and NVA inside the buildings would shoot-through the doors at us. WHEN DUCKING INTO DOORWAYS FOR COVER, BE AWARE OF WHAT'S AT YOUR BACK. IF IT'S A DOOR, GET LOW AND BE PREPARED FOR INCOMING FROM INSIDE THE BUILDING.

15. SNEAK A PEEK: At regular intervals in urban fighting you will find yourself at a corner or intersection, wanting desperately to know what's on the other side. **LEARN TO OBSERVE QUICKLY** by getting low and taking a quick peek around the corner or the wall. **TWO OR THREE QUICKY PEEKS MINIMIZES EXPOSURE** and lets you get a picture or plan for your next move. **DON'T HANG YOUR FACE OUT THERE** for a prolonged observation.
16. FIRE ON EMBRASURES OR LOOPHOLES: Due to the rapid, violent, confusing nature of urban fighting, there is a tendency to "spray and pray" when putting fire on an identified target. Fight this element of human nature! When you have spotted a firing embrasure or loophole from which an enemy is firing at you, **SLOW DOWN AND PUT DELIBERATE, AIMED FIRE ON THE TARGET**. In Hue we frequently took fortified positions under fire causing the enemy shooter to duck and cease firing. When we moved, he was back up and shooting. The solution is to **KILL HIM WITH AIMED ROUNDS RIGHT INTO THE SLOT**.
17. ENTER AND EXIT LOW: An enemy is under just as much pressure and adrenaline rush as you are. Remember that and **WHEN YOU ENTER OR EXIT A BULDING, GET LOW!** An enemy's initial tendency under pressure is to aim and shoot center-mass for a standing man. If you're under that point of aim, you may survive the fire.
18. DON'T MASK YOUR COVERING FIRE: Unfortunately in Hue there were a number of instances in which Marines attempting to move under covering fire from other Marines ran right into friendly fire. Put this down to confusion and the "fog of war," but you can avoid it if you **THINK BEFORE YOU MOVE UNDER COVERING FIRE**. Be sure you know where you cover's line of fire is, from his position to the target, select an intermediate or terminal position that is outside this line of fire before you move.
19. FIX BAYONETS: In Hue we experienced a number of very close encounters with NVA soldiers inside buildings or when turning into alleys or hallways. These **EYEBALL-TO-EYEBALL MEETING ENGAGEMENTS HAPPEN ALL THE TIME** and Marines need to be prepared for instant action. The best insurance is to **HAVE YOUR BAYONET FIXED** and to be prepared to deliver a quick, decisive thrust at the face or chest. If you don't kill him, you'll scare the hell out of him and cause him to retreat rapidly. This happened at least twice that I know of on the south side resulting in a wild hand-to-hand melee that could have been avoided and decided in the Marines' favor with a quick bayonet thrust.
20. FIRE FACTOR: Most buildings in an urban environment contain lots of material that will burn. We learned quickly on the south side of Hue, absent tear gas grenades at the squad level, that we could take White Phosphorus (WP) grenades, toss them into a house and depend on whatever was inside to catch fire. The resulting blaze often forced hiding NVA shooters into a panicky exit and we were able to kill them in the open.

21. **SLOW THE TEMPO:** Finally, one of our most valuable lessons fighting on the south and the north sides of Hue was to SLOW DOWN AND BE DELIBERATE. Before we got a feel for urban ops, we had a tendency to just go hey-diddle-diddle right up the middle and rely on the momentum of our attack to shock the enemy. He was not easily shocked, as we learned to our detriment. The solution was to SLOW DOWN, ASSESS THE SITUATION, MAKE A DELIBERATE PLAN, AND CARRY IT OUT WITH VIGOR!

### **Additional Input on Small Unit Tactics from John Erskine:**

Sergeant John Erskine entered the battle for Hue City as a Platoon Guide in the 1st Platoon, Charlie Company. Within two days of the fighting, John was assigned as the Platoon Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon after his Platoon Sergeant, Staff Sergeant Robert Odum, and his Platoon Commander, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant John Aamodt, were both wounded and medevacced. Shortly after taking over as “Charlie Three Actual”, several RPG rounds struck the building that John and some of his Marines were in, and he was seriously wounded and medevacced. Here are John’s contributions:

- A. Many of our officers and senior staff NCO’s are all bottled up on the front lines in city combat, and we lost most of ours in the first few days in Hue. I think it is imperative that Marines of all ranks be extensively trained in map reading and radio communications, so that any panic and confusion can be avoided when leaders go down.
- B. Corpsmen cannot be everywhere at once. Marines need to have more medical training for all ranks, especially when dealing with traumatic wounds.
- C. It’s nice to have the high ground, but how do you get there? How about using grappling hooks; some could be mortar type (like those used by the Rangers climbing the cliffs at Normandy).
- D. Plastic dayglow paint balls carried in tubes, for marking cleared areas. Simply throw them against buildings or pavement.
- E. Instead of quick peeking around buildings and walls, use portable periscopes.

### **Urban Tactics for Supporting Arms:**

Supporting arms are most effective prior to “danger close” to minimize the potential of friendly casualties, and to maximize preparatory fires to support the infantry’s attack. During Operation “HUE CITY”, the most effective indirect fire during “danger close” was from the 8-inch gun. We recommend that the supporting axis of fire be perpendicular as well as parallel. Finally, in the event, as in the case of Operation “HUE CITY”, that, due to political considerations, proper preparatory fires would not be allowed, that a variety of artillery fires such as smoke, delayed fuses, high angle, etc. be incorporated with the infantry’s attack. Combined arms coordination training for urban combat is critical.

Other advantages of preparatory fires include the destruction of the camouflage of enemy positions, the psychological shock factor against enemy troops, and the fact that heavy weapons can create new avenues of attack and egress for armored vehicles.

One of the most effective aspects of supporting arms during the battle for Hue were the “killer teams” that evolved; an M-48 tank and an Ontos would pair up and maneuver together as a team. This would allow either the tank or the Ontos to maneuver into a good firing position, while the other covered. Further, the devastating firepower put out by the 90mm tank cannon and the (6) 106’s of the Ontos turned out to be extremely beneficial because of their capabilities to deliver pinpoint firepower. Armored vehicles can provide many benefits to the infantry engaged in urban combat, as they provide some cover from enemy small arms fire. However, armored vehicles can also become “rocket magnets” producing casualties for infantry troops in close proximity.

Other than in instances of harassment and interdiction fires, buildings that are hit by heavy weapons should be attacked immediately, using whatever shock benefit that may be derived, and all efforts made to clear and neutralize all enemy positions in that particular building before the attack is stopped (whenever possible).

Remember that when calling in fire missions, you can request “splash” so that friendly troops have time to take cover immediately prior to impact.

In daytime operations, the usage of covering smoke is often helpful when Marines must attack across open areas.

However, as was learned during Operation “HUE CITY”, even with proper support of heavy weapons, which was ultimately provided to the Marines, we faced “hard core” North Vietnamese Army troops who fought from prepared positions, moved to secondary positions, fought again, and finally, very reluctantly, died. In the capture of each room, each floor, each rooftop, each building, each street, it was ultimately the Marine rifleman who won the battle.

It is critical for infantry units to know both the capabilities as well as the *limitations* of supporting arms. For example, naval gunfire is a more flat trajectory weapon, and not necessarily effective due to the vertical terrain (buildings). Further, in our experience, it was not smart to be on the gun-target line because the first round was typically not as accurate as artillery or mortars, in terms of range specified.

Another aspect of supporting arms limitations has to do with helicopter support. Urban terrain is not forgiving to helicopters that may be forced to make an emergency landing. Thus, helicopter pilots may be reluctant to fly over urban terrain. Further, maneuvering helicopters in urban terrain is a very difficult and dangerous proposition.

One very tragic aspect of the use of supporting arms in urban combat is that the likelihood of civilian casualties is very high. In at least two situations that we are aware of, the NVA used civilians as “screens” for their infantry troops, and fire missions were, of necessity, called in on those positions.

**On the Use of Chemical Weapons:**

During 1/5's battle inside the Citadel fortress (which kicked off on 13 February 1968) the battalion progressed a total of four blocks along our avenue of attack, which was four blocks wide. Thus, 1/5 secured a total of sixteen city blocks within our assigned area of operations after nearly two weeks of heavy street fighting (13-25 February 1968). Accomplishing this, we suffered nearly 50% casualties at the hands of a well-prepared, determined force of NVA soldiers, a force that was finally estimated to be nearly 11,000 strong in the Hue City area of operations.

On 25 February 1968, Marines from Charlie Company shot off three E-8 gas launchers, each carrying about 40 CS gas grenades, toward the enemy's last known position. The next morning, 1/5 took control of the remaining twelve city blocks in about three hours, without a single casualty, because the NVA was not equipped to deal with the tear gas attack and was forced to withdraw.

No one can ever be certain that the use of chemical weapons would have made a difference in the initial stages of the battle (although we were all issued new gas masks the day before we went into Hue City!), but many of the veterans of that battle have often wondered what might have happened if the E-8's had been deployed in the early stages of the battle. We recommend the judicious use of chemical weapons, such as tear gas, etc. for urban combat operations.

## **Administration**

### **Planning and Preparations:**

The inherent complexities of urban combat are such that special attention needs to be paid toward planning and preparations. Training, training, training; practice makes perfect. A coordinated Marine attack on an enemy-held position in a town or city can be equated to an intricate opera or Broadway production, although the stakes are much higher. Entry techniques, room search and clearing techniques, voice commands indicating movement or progress, fire discipline, the use of grenades, rockets, and supporting fires, communications, all of these must be rehearsed and improved, until they become second nature to our urban warriors.

Further, all plans must be communicated and rehearsed at each level of command, from the fire team to the company and above. In particular, platoon commanders, platoon sergeants, squad leaders and fire team leaders must be aware of each man's assignment. This should include who goes into a structure first, and who covers. Hand and arm signals, as well as vocal commands should be established and practiced.

### **Medical:** (Input from Doc John Loudermilk, US Navy Corpsman)

The following recommendations are made regarding training and preparations for field corpsmen who support Marine units in urban combat:

- Augment corpsmen's field pack with a medical surgical kit and antibiotic creams.
- Increase knowledge of:
  - ✓ Treatment of rashes and dermatitis.
  - ✓ Treatment for opening airways / crico thyroidotomy.
  - ✓ Treatment of battle trauma (psychological).
- C. P. R. certification / refresher.
- Periodic training sessions at B.A.S. or R.A.S., and discuss ongoing problem resolution in the field, answering questions of corpsmen.
- Increase knowledge of childbirth procedures. (NOTE: Although this comment was made in a somewhat lighthearted way, there is a serious aspect to this issue. Doc Loudermilk helped a Vietnamese woman give birth during the battle inside the Citadel of Hue.)
- Follow up information regarding casualties back to their unit.
- Time off after major battles.
- Better record keeping.
- Small, motorized vehicles will be required for both supply and medical evacuation. This will reduce the number of able-bodied Marines required to move wounded to the rear area.

Additional Input from “Doc” John Loudermilk  
December 10, 2001

In regards to the complex situations corpsmen and Marines will face in urban fighting such as we did in Hue City I have the following additional comments to submit which may be of interest. I submit these thoughts in hopes of better preparing our Marines and Corpsmen through sharing what I experienced as a C 1/5 “Doc” in 1967 and 1968.

### **1.) Administering aid to multiple casualties**

The corpsman will often be challenged with the situation of treating *multiple casualties*. The corpsman must practice triage concepts. When this happened to me I ran to each injured man, determined the extent of his injuries, gave him initial and immediate treatment, then went on to the next man until I had treated all of them. I then quickly analyzed the order in which I felt I should treat them again before continuing. Don’t take for granted a man is going to be okay after you have treated him for his obvious injury. Also consider preparing him for oncoming shock. Do the best you can and move on.

In Hue I was faced with a room of injured Marines who had been wounded when an NVA soldier threw a grenade through a window into the room they were in. I had to treat all of the injured but I had to do this cautiously and effectively. I treated all of the injured men but I also had to determine the order I returned to them after my initial observation and treatment of each man.

Urban fighting has a fatal tendency to provide situations where men will unconsciously group together. Many times these men will be in an open area. The brave Marines with whom I served always provided cover fire or even a bodyguard for me when I had to care for injured men and could not shield myself.

### **2.) Playbook**

It would be good for Marines and Corpsman to practice rescue actions together and have plans of action to promote the safety and success of all rescue efforts. (e.g. man lying in street injured, sniper across the street waiting, etc.)

Football teams have play sheets and know exactly what to do in a given situation. War is not a game but we must practice and be prepared to succeed.

### **3.) Avoid Carelessness**

A young Marine walked from the rear room we were in and into the front room facing the street. The room had a couple of large windows. He forgot where he was for a moment and a sniper across the street shot him in the chest. I was able to go in and drag him out, treat him and



medevac him. Urban fighting demands our vigilance whenever we are moving. The enemy can be anywhere and everywhere. The open room with its large windows proved almost fatal to this Marine.

#### **4.) Nourishment**

When in battle we must have good water to sustain us. We had to get our water wherever we found it. We found water in urns in some of the houses and used it after dropping a couple of Halazone tablets into it. This may be something to consider in the future. *Water and food are great contributors to morale.*

#### **5.) Treating the unseen injury**

We cannot overlook the *psychological condition of our men*. I would suggest that our Corpsmen be trained to recognize P.T.S.D. or "shell shock" as it was formerly called. These men suffer injuries we cannot see but are just as real as those seen.

#### **6.) Weapons Training for Corpsmen**

A Corpsman should be familiar with every weapon in the platoon. Typically in the Vietnam War, a Corpsman carried only a .45 caliber pistol. When I was called upon with two other corpsmen to come to the aid of a woman about to give birth we went to her aid. The three of us maintained our own security for the night in that dark building while the newborn child lay in the bed behind us. Two of us were at the windows and one of us was at the rear in the dark entrance to the rooms. We were given M-16's because we were understandably short of men.

Another time when I was with a squad of men heading for an ambush position we were hit with command detonated mines. I was knocked unconscious and when I came to I thought I was the only one alive. I ran to the point man and after treating him I emptied his M-16 on the side of the road where he had been walking. I did this until I reached the end of the squad where I found two other men. If I had not known how to use the M-16 and contributed to our combined efforts to defend ourselves and treat our injured until help arrived, I shudder to think what the outcome may have been. For the corpsman's own safety I believe he should be trained to use every weapon the platoon carries.

#### **7.) Record keeping is Essential**

Finally, the Corpsman usually treats himself when he is injured. Usually he is the only medical person around and very rarely are his injuries reported unless they are severe. With the intensity of urban fighting and the constant change of personnel it is very difficult to keep accurate records. Needless to say when a man is fighting to survive the last thing on his mind are records. But later in life the Marine or Corpsman may need a record of a wartime injury to provide evidence for a V.A. claim. Maintaining accurate records are something to consider in future training. A V.A. clerk once told me there was no evidence I had ever been in Vietnam!

## **Command and Control**

In full-scale urban conflict, especially in situations where enemy dispositions are not well known, initial contact with the enemy can, and most likely will be (a.) unexpected, (b.) at very close range, and (c.) massively devastating. Command and control, the basic Marine's connection to his leadership, can disappear in the blink of an eye. During Operation "HUE CITY", C/1/5 lost two of its three 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Platoon Commanders; Staff Sergeants and Sergeants became platoon commanders; PFC's were squad leaders. In urban combat it would not be at all surprising to find Corporals as platoon commanders, given the potentially high casualty rates. The critical factor for unit survival in these situations is that unit's ability to immediately determine the enemy's positions and to return a high volume of sustained fire on those positions, allowing maneuverability against them.

During the first day of 1/5's involvement in Operation "HUE CITY", Alpha Company lost its C.O., its X.O. and much of the company C.P. Group. Of necessity, Alpha was pulled back to the battalion rear for reorganization. The loss of a few leaders effectively eliminated an entire company. This also delayed the battalion's attack, blunting our initiative.

The individual Marine who is under heavy enemy fire from very close range, who may now be cut off from his team and/or squad leader, needs to have been thoroughly informed of communications codes, lines of departure, lines of stoppage, friendly unit dispositions and the ability to call in supporting fires and conduct contingency plans. In short, in urban conflict situations, command and control needs to be understood at every level down to the basic Marine.

Based upon our experiences during Operation "HUE CITY", we recommend you train for high levels of performance, expect the unexpected, expect chaos, and plan for all possibilities.

Respectfully submitted, and Semper Fidelis!  
Operation "HUE CITY" Veterans,

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*Platoon Guide, C/1/5*