

The Battle of Huế

BLUF: The Battle of Huế, 31 January 1968 to 2 March 1968, was a significant military engagement during the Tết Offensive launched by North Vietnam and the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War. After initially losing control of most of Hue, and its surroundings, the combined South Vietnamese and American forces, led by the 1st and 5th Marines, gradually recaptured the city over one month of intense street-by-street fighting. The battle was one of the longest and bloodiest of the war. Huế helped convince the majority of Americans that the United States was not winning the war.

KEY MARINES: GySgt. John Canley, Sgt. Alfredo Cantu Gonzalez, LCpl. “Ingenuity” and PFC. “Power,” BGen. Foster LaHue.

SETTING THE STAGE: Hue was the cultural and religious center of Vietnam. The North Vietnamese specifically targeted Huế for capture during the Tết Offensive with the expectation that the citizens of Huế and members of the Republic of Vietnam Army (ARVN) would support and join the Tết Offensive against South Vietnamese and American forces to liberate South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) forces infiltrated into Huế and nearby mountain staging areas establishing weapons caches and supply points. The NVA and VC assembled 15 to 18 battalions for the attack on Huế. Their intelligence of ARVN, U.S. Marine, and Army forces in the area was detailed and accurate.

Conversely, the ARVN, Marine, and Army intelligence of NVA and VC forces in and around Huế was poor. ARVN and US forces underestimated enemy strength in and around Hue and were caught off guard when the NVA and VC struck. The initial estimate of NVA and VC forces was 8,000. This number was later revised to 12,000 once the battle was underway. By 31 January 1968, NVA and VC forces occupied and controlled the city except for the 1st ARVN Division inside Huế and the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) at the south end. The 1st and 5th Marines were positioned south of Huế.

THE STORY: On 31 January, the 2/5 Marines began attacking southern Hue with house by house and block by block street fighting until southern Huế was secured on 25 February. The 2/5 Marines used the Marine street fighting doctrine developed during Korean War combat in Seoul to adapt and overcome. Capt. Michael Downs stated, “It’s going to be like this for every house, every block. One man can keep a whole unit pinned down. We need air and artillery. We’ll get no place without it.” Beginning on 31 January, the 2/5 Marines began taking back southern Huế. They skillfully used a combination of weapons: M-48 tanks, Army M45 quad 50 caliber machine gun trucks, Army Duster twin 40mm light armored vehicles, Ontos quad 105mm recoilless rifles, and Mule vehicle 105mm recoilless rifle and 3.5-inch rocket launchers. Even with this firepower, the 2/5 Marines had a tough job blasting the enemy in southern Huế out of fortified and concealed machine gun and sniper positions on rooftops and at upper windows in taller buildings, in bunkers, and behind stone walls. In addition to organic small arms, including tear gas and sniper rifles, Marine infantry relied on heavy weapons support from 60mm and 82mm mortars, 4.2-inch mortars, and 155mm artillery.

Meanwhile, the 1/5 Marines moved around Huế to attack from the north. Beginning 15 February and continuing through 24 February, they moved into Huế from the north to attack the Citadel while 2/5 attacked the Citadel from the south. The Citadel was the major NVA and VC bastion to conquer to control Huế. Both 1/5 and 2/5

applied the street fighting methods proven in southern Huế and gradually wore down the enemy despite heavy resistance and closed the ring around the remaining NVA and VC forces in and around the Citadel. At this point in the battle, the NVA still had three battalions in the Citadel, which were being resupplied. The U.S. expected the NVA to counterattack, but they never did, thanks to assistance from the 1st Cavalry and 101st Airborne Division units that sealed off the city from the northwest and southwest, severing enemy communications and supply lines. Mop-up operations started on 25 February and continued until 2 March, when Huế was declared secure. Before the U.S. retook the city, the enemy slaughtered 3,000 innocent civilians in Communist roundups.

AFTERMATH: The Battle of Huế was a significant component of the entire Tết Offensive. It was the only battle in Tết that was characterized by intense urban warfare. The Marines adapted from jungle to urban warfare and, despite heavy losses, prevailed. The NVA and VC were ejected from Hue and defeated. The NVA did not mount a new offensive until 1972, attacking the Dong Ha Bridge. The NVA and VC were slow to recover, not able to mount another offensive until 1974-1975, once the U.S. began pulling out of Vietnam.

There were a few conclusions and takeaways from Operation Huế City. The U.S. and ARVN had poor intelligence and were caught off guard compared to good intelligence and preparation by the NVA. Enemy numbers were initially underestimated, and consequently, inadequate numbers of Marines were sent to drive the enemy out of Huế. As a result, reinforcements were committed piecemeal. The Marines adapted their tactics and, with heroic determination, drove the NVA and VC from Huế despite being spread too thin and fire support being restricted mainly due to the urban environment and the proximity of friendly units to enemy units. Task Force X-Ray, which included the 1/5 and 2/5 Marines, the 1st ARVN Division, and the 1st Cavalry Division, fought their own battles in isolation. No solitary commander united the allied effort. In addition to fighting the enemy, the Marines had to deal with population control of displaced civilians. The perception of Huế at home was that it was an unmitigated disaster. America was losing the war instead of winning it and led to the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam.

QUESTIONS

1. Which leadership skills did Marines display to defeat the NVA in Huế?
2. What lessons learned by the Marines in Huế be applied to future Marine Corps battles?
3. What is the importance of studying the Marines' combat performance during the Battle of Huế?

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