

Keystone Battle Brief

The Battle of Hue City

31 January-25 February 1968

Notes were created from Richard Camp's (Col. Ret.) *Death in the Citadel: U.S. Marines in the Battle for Hue City, 31 January to 2 March 1968* (2017).

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I. **Hue:**

The city of Hue (pronounced Way) was in the northern end of South Vietnam situated along the Perfume (or Huong) River. The river reached the South China Sea seven kilometers to the northwest of the city, and about the same distance to the west was the north/south running Annamite Mountains. West of the mountains was the Ashau Valley, an important part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and beyond was the border with Laos. Hue was the provincial capital of Thua Thien Province and was the third largest city Vietnam in 1968 with a population of 140,000. The city was the intellectual and religious center of Vietnam as well as being the former imperial capital. During the war thus far the city had remained almost entirely untouched by enemy action and was by all accounts a beautiful city.

Hue was divided into two sections. North of the Perfume (Huong) River was the Old City (or the Imperial City) which was dominated by the Citadel, a massive-walled fortress, complete with a surrounding moat, which had been modeled after the Forbidden City in Peking, China. The six-square-kilometer architectural feat had been built in the first two decades of the 19th century and contained market squares, gardens, parks, pagodas, residences, and a walled Imperial Palace compound. The southern section of Hue, in contrast, was a modern and bustling municipality with buildings in the European and American style. Despite being half the size of the Citadel, the southern city held many of Hue's important government and public buildings such as the provincial headquarters, prison, hospital, treasury, and the campus of the prestigious Hue University.

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II. Friendly Unit Disposition:

Despite Hue's importance, it was not considered a likely NVA target and as such there was not a concentrated U.S. and South Vietnamese presence in the Phu Bai area (the area around Hue). The South Vietnamese defended the city lightly, with less than a thousand men, and though their 1st ARVN Infantry Division (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) was headquartered in the *Mang Ca* compound, a walled mini-fortress in the northeast corner of the Citadel, only one of the division's three regiments, the 3rd, remained in the area. The four battalions of the 3rd Regiment were, in turn, also spread around the sector and none occupied the city itself. For their part, the Americans had a few hundred military personnel stationed in the southern city, but these were nearly all non-combatants. One hundred of these personnel were advisors and administrative types that operated out of the lightly defended MACV Compound near Hue University.

The Phu Bai area of responsibility fell under the control of Task Force X-Ray, a Marine command that included three battalions of Marines from two different regiments, namely 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and 1st and 2d Battalions, 5th Marines. The U.S. Army also had two brigades in the vicinity. The 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division was stationed in Camp Evans north of Hue, and to the south was the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division at Phu Bai Combat Base.

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III. The Tet Offensive:

The North Vietnamese Army and Vietcong unleashed a massive offensive during the 1968 Tet holiday, the Vietnamese new year which in 1968 fell on 30 January. They had been moving men and materials and making preparations for the offensive for months, and when the given day arrived, they struck at military and civilian targets all across South Vietnam. The siege of the American combat base at Khe Sanh, which had begun on 21 January by an estimated 20,000 NVA soldiers, persisted, while nearly every provincial city now came under attack. Even the South Vietnamese capital city of Saigon itself came under attack. Not surprisingly, a major arm of this widespread enemy offensive was aimed at capturing Hue. Fourteen enemy battalions had been assembled for the assault, and between fifteen to eighteen battalions would take part in the battle before it was over. The *6th NVA Regiment* was tasked with taking the Citadel and was given a number of targets on the northern side of the river including: the *Mang Ca* compound, the *Tay Loc* Airfield, and the Imperial Palace. The *4th NVA Regiment* was tasked with taking the southern city of Hue and was also given numerous objectives. The NVA and Vietcong enjoyed good intelligence preparations going into the fight for Hue, supplied largely from HUMINT that had previously infiltrated the city. The American commanders, conversely, were completely blind to enemy movements and were caught completely by surprise. It should also be pointed out that the size of the enemy attacking force at Hue was underestimated.

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IV. Hue – 31 January:

The NVA and Vietcong swept through Hue. They immediately rounded up 3000 individuals who had been previously identified and listed as “cruel tyrants and reactionary elements” and secretly executed them. The NVA and Vietcong largely controlled both the Old City as well as the modern city, but two allied holdout areas remained, one on each side of the river. In the Citadel the commander of the South Vietnamese 1st Infantry Division, General Truong, was able to beat off enemy attacks and hold on to his headquarters in the *Mang Ca* compound. General Truong then called for ARVN reinforcements and a combined convoy of elements of the 7th ARVN Cavalry and 1st ARVN Airborne Task Force were able to enter the citadel after a bitter fight and sustaining heavy casualties. Similarly, in the southern city, the personnel of the MACV compound fought off the NVA attacks long enough to be relieved. Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, reinforced with four tanks from the 3d Tank Battalion, fought their way to the MACV compound, ensuring it remained in American hands. LtCol Marcus J. Gravel, the commander of 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the commander of the ad hoc two-company Marine relief force, was then given an order by Task Force X-Ray that greatly reflected the lack of American command situational awareness at the time. Gravel was ordered (against his own personal objections) to move into the Citadel and relieve pressure on General Truong’s 1st Division headquarters. LtCol Gravel, forced to leave one company of Marines behind to secure the MACV compound, led a costly one company (though armor supported) assault across the Nguyen Hoang Bridge and pulled back after suffering heavy casualties.

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V. The Battle for southern Hue:

A. 31 January-1 February

Beginning on 1 February the extent of the situation was becoming clearer to all allied forces in the area. It was decided that, for now, the 1st ARVN Division would be responsible for dealing with the Citadel while Task Force X-Ray would be responsible for the southern city. The fight for the city was officially dubbed Operation Hue City. Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue, commander Task Force X-Ray, saw the operation happening in four phases: Phase I, initial commitment of reaction forces; Phase II, buildup of forces south of the Perfume River and clearing that portion of the city of enemy forces; Phase III, operations to recapture the Citadel; and Phase IV, Operations in the urban and rural areas surrounding the city. Under the command of LtCol Gravel (commander 1/1), A/1/1 and G/2/5 launched an attack toward the provincial building and prison. Meanwhile, north of the river, 1st ARVN Division was able to recapture *Tay Loc* Airfield.

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B. 2 February

On 2 February the Army's 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division launched an attack southeast towards Hue to cut off enemy supply lines and escape routes but their attack was badly mauled. The Marines in the city were reinforced, Company H, 2/5 having to fight through an enemy ambush to reach the MACV compound. "The compound reminded me of an old fort surrounded by Indians," the commander of H Company, Capt Christmas, said. After a three-hour fight the reinforced Marines were able to reach the Hue University Campus, but when a

tank was hit they were ordered to withdraw back to their MACV positions. That night the NVA dropped the railroad bridge across the Perfume River on the west side of the city but the bridge across the Phu Cam Canal was left untouched.

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C. 3-4 February

On 3 February the command groups of the 1st Marines and 2d Battalion, 5th Marines arrived in Hue. The two Marine battalions in Hue, 1/1 and 2/5, were commanded by LtCol Gravel and LtCol Earnest C. Cheatham respectively, but overall command rested with Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, the commander of 1st Marines. Hughes had Cheatham and 2/5 take the lead in clearing the southern city while he had Gravel's 1/1 pull back and keep the supply route into the city open. Three companies of 2/5, F, G, and H (A Co was left under the control of Gravel), attacked towards the post office and treasury building from the university, attacking with two companies while leaving one in reserve. After five or six assaults, the buildings were captured but the Marines were forced to fall back because of their few numbers. The two attacking companies had a frontage of two blocks, and though the Marines' right was secured by the river their left was open and subject to constant harassing automatic rifle fire by the enemy, fire from outside the Marines' lines. On the evening of 3 February all supporting arms restrictions were removed south of the river but poor weather prevented air support from being used. Late on the 3d or early on the 4th the An Cuu Route 1 Bridge over the Phu Cam Canal was destroyed making Marine resupply more difficult. Fortunately, the Marines were well stocked. On the morning of 4 February Colonel Hughes discussed the

situation with his commanders and had 1/1 take position on 2/5's left. The advance then continued.

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D. 5-8 February – Block by Block

February 5-8 was characterized by intense block by block fighting. The NVA utilized strongpoints and defended every other street. One Marine described the situation as “like fighting a hive of bees. Fire was coming from street level, from windows on the second floor and from the roof of every building. We had to crawl everywhere and then call in the tanks so we could retrieve our wounded.” During this stage of the fighting 2d battalion's area of operations was eleven blocks wide and eight to nine blocks deep. The hospital and prison were captured and then on 6 February, after a five-hour battle, the Marines, supported by M-48 tanks and M-50 Ontos (armored vehicle equipped with six recoilless rifles), captured the provincial headquarters. The *4th NVA Regiment* had been using the building as a headquarters and after its capture much of the resistance in the southern city collapsed.

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E. 6-10 February

On 7 February the Marines renewed their offensive and NVA resistance largely evaporated. By 10 February they had reached their objectives and overtook enemy supplies in abandoned positions. The southern sector of the city was in Marine hands but the Citadel was still largely controlled by the NVA. During the clearing of the modern city the Marines had suffered 38 dead and 320 wounded (a high percentage of the casualties being replacements)

while the enemy had approximately 1000 dead and an untold number wounded. By 13 February Marine engineers had built a pontoon bridge alongside the destroyed An Cuu span allowing for the flow of supplies to Marines and civilians alike to resume.

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VI. The Battle for the Citadel:

A. 3-12 February

By 4 February the 1st ARVN Division was reported to have killed 700 of the enemy, but while the Marines were successfully clearing out the southern city the fighting in the Citadel was reduced to a stalemate. The NVA had fortified hundreds of strong stone structures and created a series of defensive lines composed of interconnected strong points. To make matters worse, the NVA were able to move reinforcements into the Citadel at night. From 3 to 12 February the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division fared no better than the ARVN forces, and after heavy fighting, the situation west of the Citadel was typified by stalemate as well. 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry of the 3d Brigade was heavily engaged after they had moved to seal off the city from the west. Given the amount of resistance the battalion faced they likely occupied an enemy exfiltration route and in one sense were ideally placed. Nevertheless, being under heavy enemy pressure and devoid of any friendly support, the battalion withdrew in the cover of darkness from the blocking position held to a hilltop six kilometers west of the city. In the meantime the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines prepared to enter the Citadel. During the interim Marines had made improvements to the coordination of support fires for the upcoming fight, most notably attaching forward observers to ARVN units engaged in the Citadel.

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B. 11-14 February

On 11 through 13 February, the Vietnamese Marine Task Force was inserted into the Citadel. At roughly the same time, 11 through 12 February, Companies A, B, and C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines had arrived in southern Hue and were airlifted inside the *Mang Ca* compound. 0800 13 February 1/5 moved out with five tanks in support. The plan was for 1/5 to relieve ARVN airborne units in place on the line and to continue the attack. As soon as the Marines crossed their line of departure, however, they were met with fierce enemy resistance from heavily fortified positions. “[Within] fifteen minutes..., all hell broke loose. There was no Airborne units in the area and Company A was up to their armpits in NVA. Enemy elements of squad and platoon [size] in well prepared positions and bunkers dug in built up areas and along the Citadel walls.” Renewed attacks on 14 February were also stalled and D Co, 1/5 was added to the battalion.

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C. 15-17 February

On the 15th of February, after a ferocious six-hour fight, a heavily supported 1/5 captured a tower on the east wall of the Citadel. The fighting continued and became a brutal constant fight for survival. Company D’s commander, Captain Myron C. Harrington, described the situation best.

I had to admire the courage and discipline of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, but no more than my own men. We were both in a face-to-face, eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Sometimes they were only twenty or thirty yards from us, and once we killed a sniper only ten yards away. After a while, survival was the name of the game

as you sat there in the semidarkness, with the firing going on constantly...And the horrible smell. You tasted it as you ate your rations, as if you were eating death. It permeated your clothes, which you couldn't wash because water was very scarce...My strategy was to keep as many of my Marines alive as possible, and yet accomplish the mission. You went through the full range of emotions, seeing your buddies being hit, but you couldn't feel sorry for them because you had others to think about. It was dreary, and still we weren't depressed. We were doing our job—successfully.

On 16 February 1/5 continued to push into the Citadel against NVA better adapted to city fighting than those that had defended southern Hue. However, the Marines, who had been accustomed to jungle warfare, were rapidly readjusting and were acquiring a new mastery of urban tactics. The M-48s that supported the Marines began to use fused shells that penetrated the concrete structures better, while Marines in 1/11 Artillery very effectively used CS mortar rounds to incapacitate enemies defending buildings. After heavy fighting a temporary halt to the advance was called on 17 February.

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D. 15-17 February (Continued)

On 16 February it was estimated that the NVA still had at least 3 Battalions defending the Citadel, and they were still being resupplied from the west. The South Vietnamese Marine battalions and 3d ARVN Regiment (the latter was part of the 1st ARVN Division) were both making slow progress. On 17 February it was determined that the NVA were about to launch a major operation in Hue and reinforcements were ordered in to seal off the city preemptively. The 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division was sent to block the northwest side of the Citadel while the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division was sent to the south and southwest. Two battalions of Marines were also called upon to not only share the southern sector, but to cover the eastern approaches as well.

(Slide 14)**E. 18-20 February**

1/5 and the South Vietnamese units met dogged resistance and 1/5 suffered higher casualties than expected. The NVA in the Citadel began to fight a rear-guard action but still managed to throw replacements into the fight. Two enemy battalions attacked the South Vietnamese Marines that were in the southwest part of the Citadel, further slowing allied progress. The Marine ranks were heavily depleted at this point in the battle. One officer remarked “We don’t have enough men, enough air support, or enough artillery to do this thing quickly....” Poor weather ensured that air support was only available on three days of the fight for the Citadel, 14 through 16 February.

(Slide 15)**F. 21-23 February**

On 21 through 23 February the NVA situation abruptly turned against the NVA. On 21 February three battalions of the 1st Cavalry Division were finally able to sever enemy communication and resupply lines west of the city and the NVA resistance in the Citadel became desperate. Early the next morning, at 0300 on 22 February, A Co 1/5 launched a successful night attack which allowed the Marines to occupy formerly enemy held buildings without resistance. Apparently the NVA troops had been withdrawing from their front-line positions each night to rest elsewhere. When the enemy troops moved in to reoccupy their positions later that morning the Marines were waiting for them. The NVA were caught completely by surprise and suffered losses. The following morning, at 0930 on 23 February,

1/5 pushed forward and enemy resistance melted. The Marines captured the southern wall of the Citadel and the Marine's fight in the Citadel was over.

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G. 24-25 February – Final Stages

Meanwhile, the South Vietnamese Marines were stopped by the NVA in the western part of the Old City. However, At 0500 on 24 February elements of the 1st ARVN Division took down the massive 54-square-meter Vietcong flag that had flown over the Citadel for twenty-five days and raised their national colors. Later that afternoon the Imperial Palace was captured. Finally, at 0300 25 February, the Vietnamese Marines followed the example of the 1/5 Marines and launched a surprise night-time attack. The attack was successful and only mopping up in Hue remained.

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VII. Closing out Operation Hue City:

24 February – 2 March

In the southern sector, from 24 to 27 February, 2/5 and the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne were involved in a largescale fight with the NVA. Despite putting up stiff resistance, the NVA withdrew in the face of American air/artillery support. On 26 February 1/5 was relieved in the Citadel by South Vietnamese units and joined 2/5 in clearing operations outside the city. 1/5 would sweep east and north of the city while 2/5 continued to deal with the south. On 29 February, after the heavy fighting in the southern sector had been resolved, 1/5 and 2/5 were

sent to search and clear east of Hue to block any enemy trying to escape from the city to the coast. On 2 March Operation Hue City was terminated.

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VIII. Summary:

The heavy enemy commitment of forces at Hue reflected the high value placed upon the city's capture by the NVA. The subsequent battle for the city was a bitter affair and constituted a major portion of the overall fight for control that occurred after the Tet Offensive began on the night of 30 January 1968. Across South Vietnam, the NVA and Vietcong were crushingly defeated, but in Hue the victory would not come overnight. The fight for Hue was characterized by intense urban warfare and cost both sides dearly. The Marines successfully cleared the southern section of the city of enemy and played a large part in clearing the northern. Block by block and building by building the NVA was slowly ejected and defeated in Hue. By 25 February both sections of the city had been cleared and the eviction of the enemy constituted the longest, bloodiest, and the largest scale urban fighting of the entire Vietnam Conflict. The Marines involved consistently displayed great tenacity and courage despite being largely outnumbered, whereas South Vietnamese and even U.S. Army units seemed to be at a loss when dealing with the enemy at crucial junctures. It is fair to say that during the Battle of Hue City United States Marines from Task Force X-Ray provided both the impetus and assurance of victory.

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IX. Conclusions and Takeaways:

- The North Vietnamese had good intel going into the battle
- South Vietnamese and American commands were caught off stride
- The enemy slaughtered 3,000 innocent people in Communist roundups
- Enemy numbers were underestimated and consequently impractical numbers of Marines were sent to drive the enemy out of Hue
- Reinforcements were committed piecemeal
- Task Force X-Ray, 1st ARVN Division, and the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division all fought their own battles in isolation from one another. No solitary commander united the allied effort.
- The Marines adapted their tactics and with heroic determination drove the NVA and Vietcong from Hue despite being spread too thin and fire support being largely restricted
- In addition to fighting the enemy, the Marines had to deal with population control of displaced civilians

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X. Suggested Reading:

Bowden, Mark. *HUE 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam*. [S.l.]: GROVE PRESS ATLANTIC MO, 2017.

Camp, Richard D. and Jack Shulimson. *Death in the Citadel: U.S. Marines in the Battle for Hue City, 31 January to 2 March 1968*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps History Division, 2017.

Shulimson, Jack, Leonard A. Blasiol, Charles R. Smith, and David A. Dawson. *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968*. Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997.