

Armor Evens the Odds in Two Urban Battles

## A Tale of Two Cities — Hue and Khorramshahr

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This article reviews the role of armor in the urban battlespace with an eye toward how history can assist in charting the way ahead. In looking at areas around the globe, beyond the confines of the former Warsaw Pact, 75 percent of politically significant urban areas are located within 150 miles of the sea.<sup>1</sup> These key factors, proximity to the littoral battlespace and frequency of conflict, coupled with continued economic growing pains of a global marketplace, make the Third World urban setting a dangerous place well into the next century.

Recent discussion on the use of armor in the urban setting highlights the numerous operational challenges faced by vehicles fighting in this arena. While the number of vehicles needed in city fighting is reduced, their ability to contribute to the combined arms team is increased. History provides many examples of the combat potential of mounted forces on urban terrain. This article discusses two.

### The Battle for Hue – Vietnam War

The Battle of Hue is well known within Marine Corps circles as a tough, street-to-street fight against a determined foe. The city of Hue had a population of 140,000 at the time of the attack in January 1968. The city was divided into two zones. The outer area was suburban in nature and located south of the Perfume River. The Citadel dominated the north bank of the river and was traditional built-up, closed terrain. The city dominated north-south communications by both rail and road along the littoral strip of South Vietnam. The 1st Infantry Division (ARVN) and the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) each had command posts within the city.<sup>2</sup>

Following the opening moves by the North Vietnam Army (NVA), Marine forces were ordered to counterattack and



In top photo, a Marine officer directs the crew of an Ontos vehicle to support infantry fighting in Hue. The Ontos was a lightly armored carrier for six 106mm recoilless rifles capable of defeating bunkers and tanks. Directly above, the 90mm gun of a Marine M48 covers advancing infantry moving down a Hue street.

relieve the compounds within the city. This effort was spearheaded by Captain Batcheller's Company A, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. This marked the first phase of the battle. To get into Hue and support the MACV compound, the relief column had to cross enemy-controlled country that varied from open rice paddies to closed, built-up areas. Captain Batcheller's company linked up with a platoon of tanks and moved his Marines from trucks to the tanks as he closed on Hue. This shift provided his column with the mobility and firepower needed to successfully run the gauntlet of enemy troops and link-up with the MACV compound<sup>3</sup> and demonstrated that bold maneuver by mounted units can penetrate through urban areas before the enemy reacts.

The second phase of the battle began after Marine combat power strengthened to a point where offensive operations could begin. This effort was highlighted by a counterattack along Le Loi Street

adjacent to the Perfume River. To clear an area of 11 blocks wide and nine blocks deep, the Marines, now designated Task Force X-Ray, mustered a battalion-plus of infantry, reinforced with a tank platoon and Ontos antitank vehicles, which were armed with six 106mm recoilless rifles each.<sup>4</sup>

Tanks provided key support to the infantry during their advance down the Le Loi. The 90mm main guns of the M-48s dominated the wide street with direct fire and responded to requests for support from pinned-down infantry numerous times. Further, tanks opened a "new" route to the forward fighting areas by knocking down walls and obstacles, enabling casualty evacuation under cover. This battle witnessed classic tank-infantry combined arms cooperation. Tanks led dismounted elements down the street while the infantry covered the rear of the vehicles, preventing surprise attacks. While the NVA fielded a full array of



weapons to defend the southern bank of the Perfume River, they lacked tanks.<sup>5</sup>

The final phase of the Battle for Hue was the taking of the Citadel. For this phase of the operation, Task Force X-Ray had grown to an infantry regiment reinforced with both a tank and anti-tank company. The weather changed to a cold drizzle with low cloud ceiling,<sup>6</sup> and poor visibility hampered the Marines' traditional firepower enhancement of close air support, and the burden for this firepower requirement shifted squarely back to the tank and Ontos units.

During this final phase, M-48 tanks and Ontos antitank vehicles were paired together. This tactic provided an effective combination for dominating the close-in fighting along the tight streets of the Citadel. The tank was used for pinpoint fire and to draw-out the enemy. The Ontos provided an area fire capability as all six tubes unleashed canister shot at close range. This method forced defenders to ground and negated any resistance prior to Marine assaults across streets or open areas. This technique proved so effective that when tank ammunition was exhausted on 17 February, there was a pause in the fighting. Mounted firepower was critical in sustaining the dismounted assault.<sup>7</sup>

The intensity of the Battle of Hue is reflected in the battle losses and ammunition usage during the fight. In the 22 days of combat for Hue, Marine casualties, KIA + WIA, totaled 1,004. Combined with the 2,184 ARVN casualties, the attacker suffered 3,188 to secure the city. On the NVA side, actual body count plus POWs was 5,202.<sup>8</sup> During this period, each tank averaged 200 rounds fired.<sup>9</sup>

This translates to a 30 percent higher ammunition consumption rate when contrasted with those listed for "heavy-intensity" combat in current planning manuals.

### **Khorramshahr — the Iran-Iraq War**

The Battle for Khorramshahr was fought between Iraqi and Iranian forces in 1980. This town is somewhat larger than Hue, with a population of 175,000 at the start of the battle.<sup>10</sup> Khorramshahr was the gateway to the oil terminal at Abadan and the whole of the Shatt Al-Arab waterway. Control of this city would unlock the approaches to the southern end of the front.

The lay-down of the town is very similar to Hue, with one key difference. Both cities have clearly defined suburban areas and a hard inner-city core. The difference is that in Khorramshahr the city core and suburban areas are on the same side of the Shatt Al-Arab waterway and not separated as in Hue. Maneuver in the city core of Khorramshahr is more constricted than in Hue. Otherwise, the two urban areas are very similar.

As the opposing forces closed on the city, the Iraqi forces enjoyed an advantage in numbers. This advantage ranged from 3-4 to 1 in infantry strength and 2.5 to 1 in tanks.<sup>11</sup> This last point is the most noticeable in contrasting the two line-ups in the battles for Hue and Khorramshahr — both sides could call on armor strength to contest the urban area. It would influence the conduct and cost of the battle at hand.

The Iraqi forces made quick strikes for key areas within the city and penetrated through the suburbs, but stalled when

they encountered Iranian Chieftain tanks. Local counterattacks by tank-infantry teams turned back the Iraqi forces at several points. The sheer weight of the Iraqi tank force settled the issue in their favor, but when Iranian armor was encountered on the defense, it stopped attacks cold. Only repeated combined arms assaults broke the ability of the Chieftains to dominate the open areas within the suburban battlespace.<sup>12</sup>

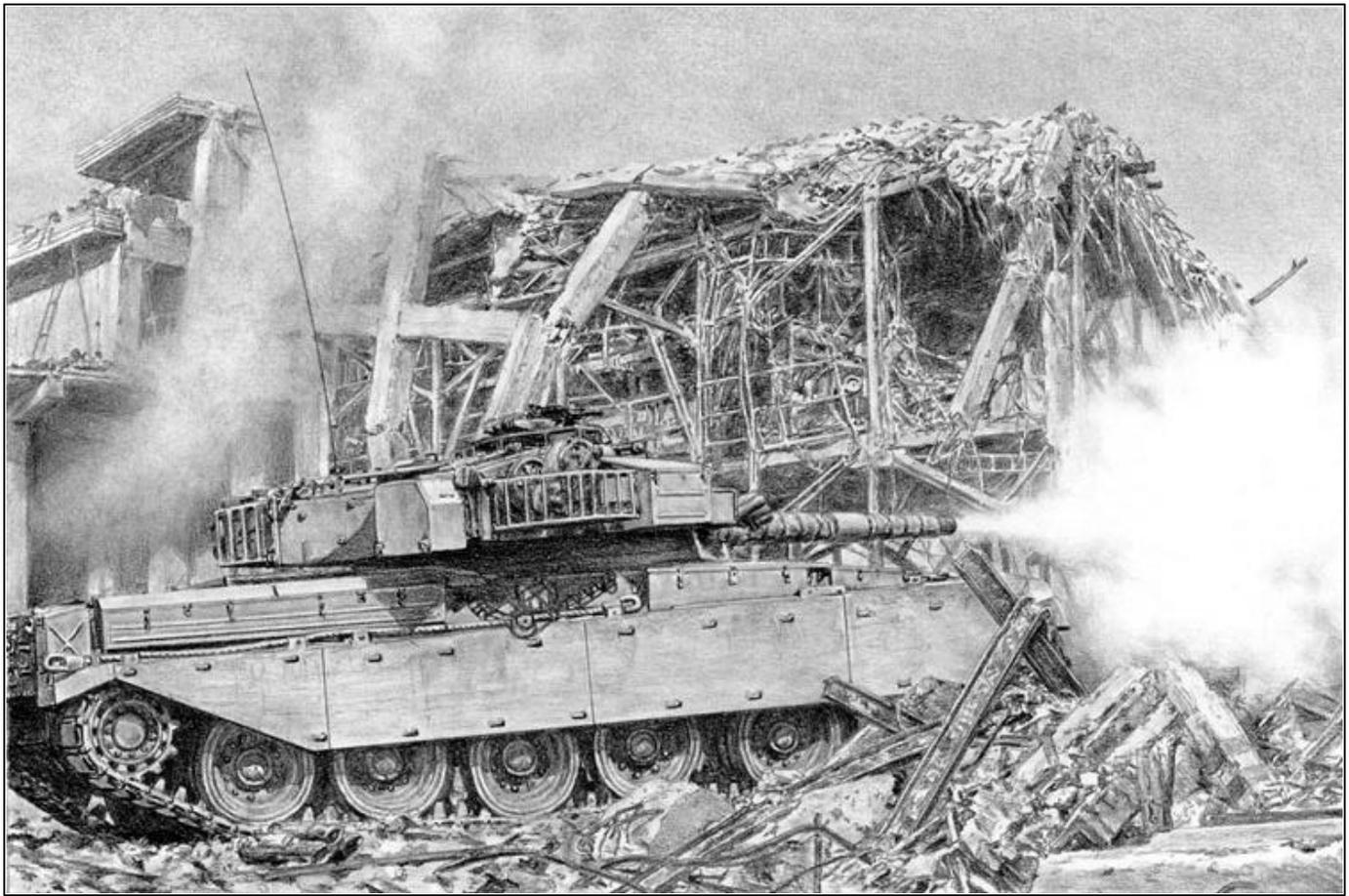
As the fighting moved toward the city core, armor operations were reduced to a supporting role. Tanks were unable to maneuver in the tight streets of this older section of town. Support by fire down long streets was still possible, and tended to control the blocks along the fringe of the city core. Given the fanaticism of the defending Iranian Basij Militias, infantry were required to clear the final pockets of resistance within the city.<sup>13</sup>

The most striking difference between this battle and that for Hue is the back and forth nature of the contest in the suburban zone. Since the defender had armor in his formation, he was consistently able to generate local tactical threats that could only be countered with close combined arms attacks. The ability of the Iraqi leadership to coordinate such attacks proved beyond their capacity at the start of the battle. By the end of the fighting, through sheer force of numbers and firepower, they were able to contest the Iranian defenders and secure the city.

The duration of the Battle for Khorramshahr was 25 days, three days longer than the fight for Hue. The attacking Iraqi forces lost from three to nine thousand in the process of taking the city. The defending Iranians, on the other hand, lost from two to three thousand attempting to hold the city and disrupt the Iraqi attack.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusions**

When contrasting these battles two lessons emerge. First, armor can operate in urban terrain and dominate the action in the suburban environment. This was demonstrated by the operational patterns of the two engagements. In Hue, the Marines were able to control the tempo of operations and apply continuous pressure on the defenders. In Khorramshahr, the Iranian defenders were able to launch successful counterattacks disrupting the Iraqi attack.




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Second, when armor dominance is achieved on the urban battlefield, it significantly improves the battlefield performance of the side that wields this sword. This is evident in reviewing the battle losses for the attacker and defender in each battle. During the Battle of Hue, the Marines kept their exchange ratio, attacker to defender, less than one. In short, a ratio of .61 ensured the Marines were killing more than the stubborn NVA defenders. Even when the slightly longer duration of the Battle of Khorramshahr is accounted for, the attacking Iraqi forces exchange ratio ran between 1.32 and 2.64. They were never able to dominate their opponent while the defenders held armor on the field of battle.

This outcome is even more striking when one considers the numbers from the Battle of Hue do not include estimates for NVA wounded but only confirmed casualty results. If these are modeled along

the lines of the battle of Khorramshahr, armor dominance in the urban setting translates to a four to sevenfold increase in the application of combat power in the close fight.

We must break out of current molds of thinking and look for new ways to employ armor within the combined arms team on the urban battlefield. Achieving armor dominance in this demanding environment ensures significant improvements in combat performance and provides the ability to control operational tempo. Harnessing the creative energies of our Marines guarantees success on the uncharted urban battlefields of the next century.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>FMFM 7-15, Military Operations in Urban Terrain (Draft), Quantico, Va., Dec 1993, p. 1-1.

<sup>2</sup>Battle for Hue — TET 1968, K. W. Nolan, Presidio Press, Novato, Calif., 1983. p. XII.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 10-12.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 184-5.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>10</sup>"Military Operations in the Gulf War: the Battle of Khorramshahr," R. D. McLaurin, Aberdeen, Md. 1982. p. 21.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

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