

Battle of Hue: The Turning Point of America's Involvement in Vietnam

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The American war in Vietnam led to repercussions that are still being felt today in both countries. It may be the practice of deficit spending that was heavily favored during the Johnson Administration, or possibly that buildings are still damaged and explosives are still being found in the soil in Vietnam. It does not matter whether it is financially or structurally, or even for health reasons, the repercussions of the war are still felt. The consequences of horrific battles, like the Siege of Khe Sanh or the constant bombing endured by the North Vietnamese, left permanent physical and mental scars in almost all soldiers and citizens. One event that trumps both however is the Tet Offensive, a series of simultaneous attacks on more than a hundred cities, towns, and military bases in South Vietnam conducted by the North Vietnamese Army and the National Liberation Front, or Viet Cong. The offensive would go down in history as the most memorable and horrific event during the war. However, within the Tet Offensive there was one battle that was the most stressful and tactically challenging in all of the Vietnam War, the Battle of Hue. As the Tet Offensive would change the course of the war, the horrific and stressful Battle of Hue would be the turning point in America's involvement in Vietnam.

To understand the Battle of Hue and its impact, it is necessary to understand how we reached the pivotal year of 1968. Vietnam has had a long history of being colonized, dating back into the 19th century, but in the 20th century the colonization began in 1940, when the Japanese conquered Vietnam during a war with China. Once Japan lost World War II, they cleared out of Vietnam, allowing the French to take over in 1946, which began the first Indochina War.¹ The war would last until 1954 when the French were defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Accords were signed. The accords called for a divided Vietnam, split at the 17th parallel, until an election was held within the next two years to reunify the country. The election never took place and Vietnam was divided into two separate states, one being communist, the North, and the South, a non-communist state. The United States began sending military advisors to South Vietnam to fortify the South Vietnamese military for the war lurking in the future. The number of advisors would exponentially grow once President Kennedy took office. In 1963, less than a month before President Kennedy was assassinated, South Vietnam would lose their president, Ngo Dinh Diem, to murder during a military coup. Unlike like their foe to the north, which had a stable leader in Ho Chi Minh, from that day forth the government of South Vietnam would essentially be a rolodex of military dictators until the end of the war. The first United States Marines would land in Vietnam in March of 1965, at the city of Da Nang. The Marines would see various types of fighting leading up to the 1968 offensive, including counter-insurgency and guerrilla warfare, but nothing would prepare them for the Tet Offensive, or the Battle of Hue.

The Tet Offensive consisted of concurrent attacks on over a hundred cities in South Vietnam, including the capital of Saigon. The North Vietnamese had two goals in mind when

¹ The Second Indochina War is known as the Vietnam War in America.

launching the offensive. First, they hoped to create an uprising in South Vietnam against the unstable Saigon regime. Secondly, they hoped for the United States to scale back the number of troops they had present in Vietnam. Considering that the communists, mainly the Viet Cong, had chosen to use guerilla tactics for most of the war up until the offensive, why did the North Vietnamese chose to attack a city like Hue? “Considering [Hue’s] cultural and intellectual importance to the Vietnamese people, it was only a matter of time before the communists tried to make it their prize.”² Furthermore, what reward would the Viet Cong and NVA³ receive for the capturing of Hue? To answer this thought-provoking question, it is essential to understand what made the city of Hue so important.

Foremost, Hue was vital for the South Vietnamese cause. Both a main rail-line and highway passed through Hue, which brought supplies from Da Nang to the demilitarized zone. To put this in the viewpoint of the Viet Cong, Hue was a key check point within the United States’ “Ho Chi Minh Trail”; it was essential for the United States to maintain hold of Hue in order to get supplies to the DMZ. Furthermore, Hue was a strategic point for Navy supply boats moving from the Perfume River to the ocean. If the NVA were to take control of Hue, they would cut off the line of US Navy boats from the river to the sea, which would hamper the strength of the naval blockade placed on the North. By understanding the military importance of Hue, the North Vietnamese gained a major advantage during the offensive, as the capturing of Hue would have multiple negative military effects on the Southern cause.

Other than being a critical military checkpoint for the Southern cause, the city of Hue was, and still is to this day, a cultural hub. With Hue being the old imperial capital of Vietnam, it was sacred to Vietnam as a whole, and had a rich political history as well. In fact, the Imperial City of Hue was built in the early 19th century and was occupied by the emperor of Vietnam, including the last emperor of Vietnam Bao Dai, until 1945, when the Japanese left Vietnam at the end of World War II. As a result of Hue’s rich Vietnamese history, the North wanted Hue to be their own, as Hue was a trophy to be had, such a trophy, that throughout Vietnams bloody history, it had only been attacked twice before the Tet Offensive. No argument can be made against the cultural importance of Hue. “It was the cultural center of Vietnam, a place of learning, a remembrance of the traditions and values of the past.”⁴ The North Vietnamese knew the shock that would be dealt to the Southern cause if Hue was attacked or captured. As a result, Hanoi was not afraid to act, even if it meant attacking the most important cultural and historical city in Vietnam.

Going into the battle, it is also important to understand the layout of Hue. As previously noted, Hue was the old imperial capital of Vietnam, meaning that it had an older section of the city, along with a newer section. The Perfume River divides the city into two parts, an old and a new part. The Imperial City part of Hue is to the northeast side of the river, which is connected to

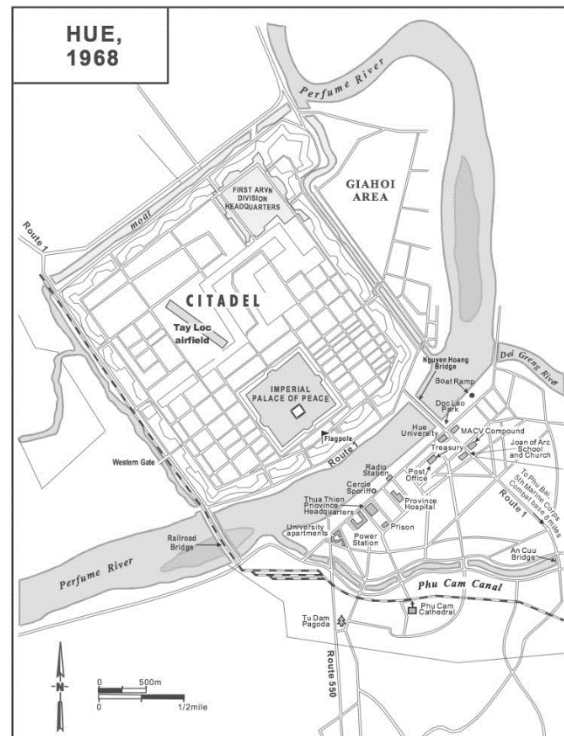
² Richard D. Camp, *Death in the Imperial City: U.S. Marines in the Battle for Hue, 31 January to 2 March 1968* (Quantico, VA: History Division, Marine Corps University, 2018), 2.

³ North Vietnam Army, it is also sometimes referred to as PAVN, or the People’s Army of Vietnam.

⁴ Keith William Nolan, *Battle for Hue: Tet, 1968* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1996), 4.

the new through two bridges. One is on the north side of the city and the other is on the southern tip of the city, this one containing the rail bridge. Furthermore, the southern edge of the city is confined by a crucial railroad. The imperial city includes the Citadel, a three-square mile complex of palaces, parks, and residences, as well as a massive fortress to protect it all.⁵ In the northernmost corner of the Imperial City was the First Army of the Republic of Vietnam Division Headquarters. The newer part of Hue contained Hue University, a prison, and a MACV⁶ compound, which was conveniently located at the end of the northern bridge. The city's layout is crucial to understanding the battle, as the layout would bring challenges to both South Vietnamese and NVA forces.

The Battle of Hue began on January 31, 1968, but the Tet Offensive was in motion well before then. The leaders of North Vietnam knew that the war had reached a point of stalemate and that they needed to make a drastic change to the way they were conducting the war. As a result of the stalemate, as well as American firepower taking a major toll on the Viet Cong, Hanoi chose to shift strategy from taking a protective, war of attrition stance to an aggressive, offensive stance. This new offensive strategy was the Tet offensive. Through Tet, the North Vietnamese planned to attack American and South Vietnamese military and government installations and hoped the attacks would cause an uprising among the South Vietnamese population against the fragile South Vietnamese Government.⁷ They hoped to achieve their goal by simultaneously attacking over a hundred cities and towns in South Vietnam, their main target being the capital of Saigon. Hanoi knew that the capital would be heavily fortified with a lot of troops and weaponry, far greater than their offensive capabilities. Because of this, another objective of the Tet Offensive was to draw enemy forces away from Saigon and to do so by occupying Hue for 5-7 days.⁸ For the North to achieve this goal they would need to commit a massive amount of troops to Hue.



The 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam and the Seizure of Hue, Raymond Lau, page 4.

⁵ James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 43.

⁶ United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam.

⁷ "The Tet Offensive," The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/exhibits/Tet68/> (accessed November/December 2018).

⁸ Marc Jason Gilbert and William P. Head, *The Tet Offensive* (Westport (Conn.): Praeger, 1996), 100-101; Gilbert and Head, *The Tet Offensive*, 100-101.

It was not only the shifting of strategy that made the Tet Offensive such a surprise, but the fact that Hanoi chose to go on the offensive during the holiday of Tet. In Vietnam, the holiday of Tet signifies the lunar new year and is a weeklong celebration that is the most important holiday in Vietnam, as it is essentially July 4th, Christmas, and New Year all in one holiday. In years past, Tet had been an informal cease fire during the war; that changed in the year 1968. The NVA and Viet Cong would use the Tet celebrations taking place in Hue as cover for infiltrating Hue and the surrounding countryside. The North Vietnamese had other advantages other than the holiday celebrations, as they could easily disguise themselves as South Vietnamese citizens who lived in Hue. The combatants would travel from various points in the north to the south via the Ho Chi Minh trail, a system of ever changing paths that the North Vietnamese used to move supplies and manpower to the South, through the countries of Laos and Cambodia. This was a key component to a successful offensive for Hanoi, as it allowed the communists to move massive amounts of men and supplies throughout South Vietnam to execute a simultaneous offensive.

The people of Hue were going about their usual Tet business while the communists prepped for their massive offensive. The military scene in Hue leading up to that January 31st day was as routine as ever, with a few exceptions. “The 1st Marine Division was redistributing its forces in the corridor between Phu Bai and Da Nang.”⁹ Phu Bai was a United State Marine base roughly 10 miles south of the newer part of Hue, while Da Nang sat 50 miles south of Phu Bai. “The principal command at the Phu Bai Combat Base was Task Force X-RAY, more formally called the 1st Marine Division Forward Headquarters.”¹⁰ This redistribution played into Hanoi’s hands, as the NVA and Viet Cong were prepping for their offensive. However, the shuffling of Marines did not end there, because the 3rd Marine Division was in the middle of moving north to Quang Tri Province, the area just south of the DMZ. The newly shuffled Marines barely had any time to learn the difficult landscape of Vietnam, giving the North Vietnamese yet another advantage going into the offensive.

While some of the United State Marines were new to the area, the Viet Cong and NVA were utilizing all resources available to prep for the attack. “Communist agents used patient and discreet observations, as well as human informants, to obtain up-to-date tactical intelligence about the military facilities in [and around] Hue.”¹¹ By doing so, Hanoi knew the situation of troop shuffling around Hue. In fact, the commander of Task Force X-RAY, Brigadier General Foster LaHue, had only assumed responsibility of the area on the 15th of January, while the North Vietnamese had spent much of late December 1967 and early January 1968 mastering the areas in and around Hue. Viet Cong preparations for the offensive were extensive to say the least. “Guerrillas made regular night excursions through the villages around Hue to make the local dogs

⁹ Camp, *Death*, 2.

¹⁰ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 9.

¹¹ Camp, *Death*, 7.

bark, thus desensitizing the inhabitants to their canine alarms.”¹² This tactic only gives us a glimpse of what the North Vietnamese were willing to endure for their cause. At the end of their preparations, the communists concluded that Hue could be quickly captured due to both the lack of soldiers protecting the city, but also because those soldiers were poor combatants.¹³ As a result, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong went through with their preparations and would attack Hue in the early morning of January 31st, 1968.

Before the fateful morning on January 31st the North Vietnamese had a miscue. On the morning of January 30th some NVA and Viet Cong forces prematurely attacked a handful of towns in South Vietnam which were going to be attacked at the launch of the offensive on the morning of the 31st. These premature attacks alerted all other southern cities about possible attacks, but no one could tell what was going on. That is not to say that the United States only gained knowledge of the offensive from the January 30th attacks. General Westmoreland, the commander of United States forces during the war, claimed to have predicted the offensive in his memoir. “A major enemy offensive obviously was coming, to be launched, I believed, shortly before Tet, so that the enemy could take advantage of the Tet cease-fire.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Westmoreland even included the Tet holiday as a possibility for the start of the offensive.¹⁵ On the 22nd Westmoreland had an interview with NBC Television’s Howard Tuckner and said that the enemy might use the eve of the Tet Festival to win a spectacular battlefield success.¹⁶ Clearly the signs pointed to an attack, as Westmoreland brought up on multiple occasions. With the offensive beginning on the 30th troops were placed on alert throughout South Vietnam. “Orders canceling leaves either came too late or were simplify disregarded.”¹⁷ This just gave the North Vietnamese one more advantage, even after their mishap, because soldiers had already been put on leave because of the Tet holiday.

Despite the warning signs that both the ARVN¹⁸ and the United States had, the offensive came as a shock to South Vietnam. “At 3:40am, on Wednesday, January 31, 1968, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong brought the war to Hue.”¹⁹ The attack on Hue began like the other coordinated attacks throughout South Vietnam, both on the 30th and the concurrent attacks on the morning of the 31st. “A signal flare lit up the night sky above Hue and a rocket barrage fell

¹² Camp, *Death*, 7.

¹³ Camp, *Death*, 7.

¹⁴ William Childs Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 318.

¹⁵ Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, 318.

¹⁶ Westmoreland, *Soldier Reports*, 318.

¹⁷ Shelby L. Stanton, *The Rise and Fall of an American Army: U.S. Ground Forces in Vietnam, 1965-1973* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), 220.

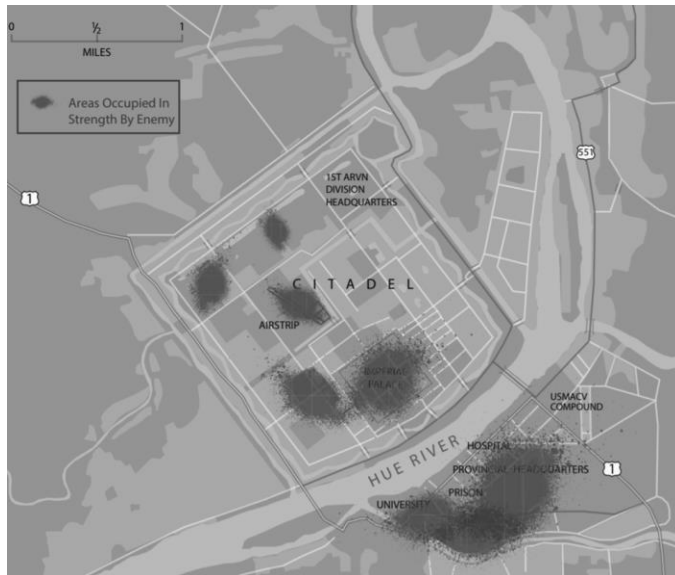
¹⁸ Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

¹⁹ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 6.

on the city from the mountains to the west.”²⁰ Just as in any other major offensive begun in previous wars, the artillery bombardment was followed by a massive ground assault. Although some NVA and Viet Cong were already inside the city perimeter, there was a delay before the ground troops attacked. Once the ground attack began, Task Force X-Ray was notified that Hue was under attack.²¹ The attack came as such a surprise that the South Vietnamese forces were overwhelmed in no time by the North Vietnamese.

Although overwhelmed at first, as some North Vietnamese troops were even disguised as South Vietnamese army members, they were eventually met by resistance from both ARVN and American forces. “The enemy battle account stated that the South Vietnamese ‘offered no strong resistance,’ while the NVA report acknowledged that ‘the heavy enemy (ARVN) fire enveloped the entire airfield. By dawn, our troops were still unable to advance’.”²² The offensive was in full swing, Hue was stunned, and the battle was in every street.

Almost every major part of the city of Hue contained North Vietnamese within minutes of the offensive beginning. These included the strategic airfield of Tay Loc, the 1st ARVN Division



Death in the Imperial City, Richard Camp, page 10.

Headquarters was near but had not yet been researched by the enemy, the Imperial Palace, and all parts of the newer Hue City, aside from the USMACV compound. General Truong, Commander of the 1st ARVN Division, ordered his Black Panther Company to return to the base to bolster the headquarters defense.²³ Just as the other parts of the city had been hit, it was only a matter of time before the ARVN HQ²⁴ was attacked, and then they were. “Army Captain Ralph O. Bray Jr., who was in the headquarters (ARVN) at the time, recalled that ‘with all the B-40s and mortars we were taking I knew the enemy was close.

When we had to stop them at our wall I knew they had the whole city’.”²⁵ Later that morning more than 60 percent of the Imperial City was under the control of North Vietnamese forces and at that point a North Vietnamese flag was raised from a giant flag pole in front of the imperial palace.

²⁰ Camp, *Death*, 9.

²¹ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 8.

²² Camp, *Death*, 9.

²³ Camp, *Death*, 9.

²⁴ Headquarters.

²⁵ Camp, *Death*, 10.

However, the scene was the same in the new part of the city, as the North Vietnamese controlled most of the city, besides the USMACV compound and a watercraft landing ramp on the river.²⁶ Within a short 5 hours of the offensive, Hue had been overtaken by war for only the 3rd time in hundreds of years at the hands of the North Vietnamese.

The fighting did not change at day break, as both the ARVN Headquarters and USMACV Compound were being attacked. General Troung at the ARVN HQ and the troops at the USMACV Compound were requesting reinforcements to fend off the attackers. "Troops in the compound began requesting immediate aid. They were isolated and their cable to the ARVN HQ had been cut, so they did not know what was happening in the Citadel."²⁷ Being isolated during the attack required the Marines to fend for themselves, so battalions began to establish defensive positions near the compound. Across the Perfume River in the Imperial City ARVN requested aid. "An armored column rolled out from the PK-17 outpost onto route 1 and headed for the city."²⁸ The convoy reached the city as a reinforcement, but at a costly price. "ARVN suffered 131 casualties, including 40 dead, and losing 4 of the 12 armored personnel carriers in the convoy."²⁹ The casualties suffered by the reinforcement would only be a glimpse of what was to come. However, things would slightly change heading into the next day.

Although the fighting was harsh during the first day, as it would be for the coming weeks, United States forces were able to stave off the invasion. The ability to set up defensive positions meant that the enemy had weakened in strength, but there was no question that they were still lurking in buildings throughout Hue. While the enemy was pinched into a stalemate at the beginning of the battle, it also gave them an opportunity to recover in both numbers and supplies. "Enemy preparations were sufficiently complete to insure adequate supplies of all types of ammunition and supply."³⁰ The number of enemies left in Hue after the first day was estimated by the South Vietnamese. "Westmoreland cabled Army General Earle G Wheeler, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the 'enemy has approximately three companies in Hue Citadel and Marines have sent battalion into the area to clear them out'."³¹ Unfortunately for the Saigon forces, Westmoreland's estimation was far too low, as it was later believed that there were at least five battalions of communist troops in and around Hue. As the battle became prolonged, so would the carnage.

On February 1st, the 2nd day of the battle, the fight for the city was officially designated Operation Hue City. Outlined by General LaHue, the operation consisted of a four-step process to

²⁶ Camp, *Death*, 12.

²⁷ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 8.

²⁸ Camp, *Death*, 14.

²⁹ Camp, *Death*, 14.

³⁰ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report, Operation Hue City, 1st Marine Division, June, 1968*, Washington, D.C., 24.

³¹ Camp, *Death* 20.

win back to city. Phase one called for an initial commitment of reaction forces, phase two was to buildup forces South of the river, as well as the clearing out of enemies in the new city, phase three dealt with operations within the Imperial City, and the final phase of Operation Hue dealt with ridding the areas around Hue of enemy forces.³² Although difficult, the four-step process outlined a realistic goal; all that was missing was a timetable to achieve the goal. A timetable would allow the South Vietnamese forces, including the Americans operating in southern Hue, to inform the citizens of Hue how their fight against the North Vietnamese was going. Unfortunately, the battle would take a turn against the citizens, as the battle would begin to take the shape of urban warfare.

As the fighting went on in both parts of Hue it was important for the South Vietnamese and Americans to work concurrently to drive the enemy back; as a result, South Vietnamese forces were responsible for the Citadel while United States Marines were responsible for the Southern City. This strategy was dictated by how the city was laid out, as there was an ARVN compound in the Imperial City and a MACV compound in the new part of Hue. "Operations in Hue indicated that the 4th NVA regiment, local force companies, and the Hue City Sapper Battalion were involved in enemy occupation south of the Perfume River."³³ The effort in the newer part of Hue consisted of several small offensives against the 4th NVA regiment in hopes to retake the city. One attempt consisted of a few companies of men supported by tanks with their mission being to liberate the jail and other buildings in the areas around the jail. Marines from the 5th company remembered that they didn't get very far from the USMACV compound before they started getting sniper fire.³⁴ Taking on fire from only a block outside of their starting point stopped the company in their tracks. The liberation of the jail and other provincial buildings on the south side of Hue would have to wait, as they returned to the compound.

The troubles for the US military in southern Hue would begin to turn on February 2nd. They would continue to fight block-to-block but would begin to take key checkpoints by which they could measure their successes. This assault was supported by a convoy of 2 tanks and armored trucks. However, before the convoy was even able to reach city limits, it met resistance. "The convoy exchanged fire with a Marine unit already in the city... everyone began shooting... out of pure fright and frenzy."³⁵ No one would be killed by the interaction. Once the reinforcements reached the city, with the aid of already present Marines, they were able to successfully take control of a USMACV radio facility, as well as Hue University. February 2nd would be one of the most successful days of Operation Hue, as two Marine lives were lost, as well as 34 wounded, while the enemy is claimed to have suffered nearly 140 deaths.³⁶

³² Camp, *Death*, 22-23.

³³ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 24.

³⁴ Camp, *Death*, 23.

³⁵ Camp, *Death*, 27.

³⁶ Camp, *Death*, 26.

Over in the imperial city ARVN forces were slowly making progress. The northwest corner of the Citadel, where the First ARVN Headquarters was located, had been cleared of NVA and Viet Cong forces. The same could not be said about the Tay Loc airbase located in the center of the Citadel. Working their way toward the western wall of old Hue, the 1st ARVN airborne Task Forces attempted to clear North Vietnamese out of the airfield. Just as during the rest of the Vietnam War, success was measured by body count. For example, if X number of Viet Cong were killed in a certain day and this was much higher than Y number of Marines killed the same day, then it was a successful day. “By 4 February 1st ARVN Division reported that nearly 700 NVA troops had been killed in the Citadel.”³⁷ The number given is an accurate representation of both the size of the Citadel, as the North Vietnamese still controlled over half of the Citadel, but also the sheer volume of men and supplies that the North Vietnamese invested into the Battle of Hue and the Tet Offensive. Unfortunately for the Saigon forces, 700 KIA suffered by the North Vietnamese was a low number, as they still controlled parts of new Hue.

Although February 2nd was a decent day for the casualty rate suffered by the Americans and South Vietnamese, the same cannot be said about February 5th, as 19 casualties (both KIA and injured) were suffered for an advance of only 75 yards.³⁸ However, for the 2d Battalion of the 5th Marines, the movement was much faster. During a 90-minute fight, the Marines were able to kill 55 NVA.³⁹ The trophy would be the hospital that was only a block around the corner from the radio building. The fight for the radio building was tough, as it is noted that the Marines received 3,000 rounds of small arm ammunition, as well as 12 60mm mortars rounds, but the Americans were able to liberate the radio station.⁴⁰ The fighting in the new city was near an end, with the Marines clearing block by block at a slow pace. The next day would see a major shift in Operation Hue.

The success being seen by the US military was not as easy as it may seem. It is necessary to remember the type of fighting that they were experiencing, which was house-to-house and wall-to-wall combat. “Moving sporadically room by room, U.S. and allied forces could only advance in spurts given the nature of urban warfare in Hue.”⁴¹ Although difficult, there were some advantages to urban warfare, at least to one Marine who preferred it over fighting in the mud. The unnamed Marine said that it is tougher in the streets, but he didn’t seem to get as tired when running, because he could visually see the damage he was inflicting.⁴²

The North Vietnamese obtained intelligence of certain battle tactics that US forces were using. “Each time [a] platoon popped smoke grenades to conceal its movement, the enemy opened

³⁷ Camp, *Death*, 43.

³⁸ Camp, *Death*, 40.

³⁹ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 29.

⁴⁰ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 29.

⁴¹ Camp, *Death*, 36.

⁴² Camp, *Death*, 36.

up with automatic weapons.”⁴³ This was a result of the NVA reading the manual of the Marines. They learned that the Marines used smoke to conceal their movement. Warfare was difficult enough. When you added that the enemy knew how you chose to move, it became even more challenging.

While ARVN battled in the older part of the city, on the 6th of February Marines would find themselves in yet another long fight, this time for the crucial provincial headquarters. As opposed to the fight for the hospital that lasted around 90 minutes, the fight for the headquarters raged on for five hours without any headway being made. The longer a US company was forced to fight, the more supplies were needed. “As a result, an untold amount of 90mm, 106mm, 81mm, and 3.5-inch rocket ammunition was expended in support of the attacking units.”⁴⁴ While a struggle, the Marines understood the task ahead of them, i.e. they understood that the building complex was strongly defended by enemies. Yet the Marines were able to break the stalemate and take control of the provincial headquarters that afternoon. The conquest would follow the same theme as the rest of the Battle of Hue, as the Marines killed 25 North Vietnamese while they sustained 1 dead and 14 wounded, a staggering difference.⁴⁵

After the liberation of the headquarters, most of the fighting in new Hue was finished. US Marines had recaptured most of the city by the 6th of February, seven days after the beginning of the Tet Offensive. “The provincial headquarters had served as a motivating symbol for both the NVA and the Marines in the modern city.”⁴⁶ In other words, it was the key in liberating the southern part of Hue. When the headquarters was liberated, so too was the southern part of the city. The provincial headquarters once served as the command post for an NVA regiment. As a result of the provincial HQ being liberated from North Vietnamese control, much of the organized resistance in Southern Hue collapsed. The cohesion of the enemy was almost nonexistent according to Lieutenant Colonel Gravel. He felt that after the loss of their provincial headquarters most North Vietnamese soldiers lost their stomach for the fight, which resulted in the main forces evaporating, leaving only local forces to fight for their cause.⁴⁷ This idea was only further reinforced when battalions in modern Hue found abandoned food, weapons, and ammunition left behind by the NVA. Finding this evidence of enemy demoralization was a great step forward in the battle for Hue.

The struggle for the Imperial City was still raging on. Around February 4th ARVN forces only held about 40% of the entire old city and that situation would continue as it was difficult for ARVN forces to gain traction. The lack of ground gained in the Citadel can be attributed to two different factors. First, NVA forces had dug-in and would not budge, but the North Vietnamese

⁴³ Camp, *Death*, 32.

⁴⁴ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 38.

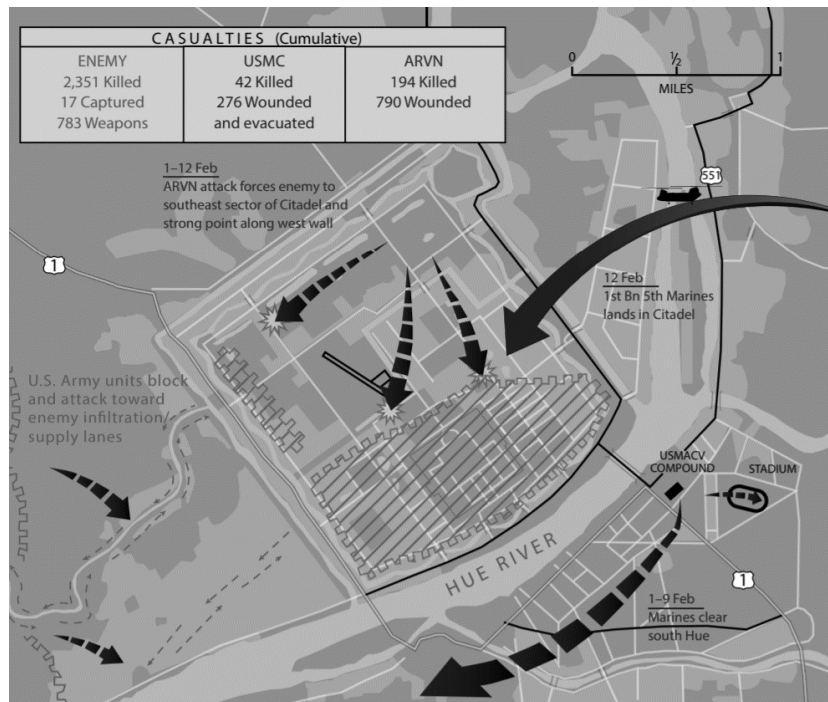
⁴⁵ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 37.

⁴⁶ Camp, *Death*, 41.

⁴⁷ Camp, *Death*, 42.

were also sending in replacements into the old city after dark. One decisive advantage that the North Vietnamese had over the Saigon forces, mainly US forces, is that they could replenish their men as much as they wished. It seemed as if they had a limitless supply of men to throw at the battle. “The enemy apparently reinforced his forces in the Citadel and maintained his own support area outside the western wall... capitalizing on the failure of friendly forces to isolate the Hue battlefield.”⁴⁸ This strategy of having unlimited men would continue into the early morning of February 7th, as several hundred North Vietnamese reinforcements scaled the southwestern wall with grappling hooks, which required ARVN forces to retreat back to the Tay Loc airfield while suffering heavy losses.⁴⁹ As a result of the heavy casualty rate sustained by ARVN, as well as the reinforced North Vietnamese, and the successful liberation of the new city, American forces would shift across the bridge into the old city. American troops joined the fight for the old imperial capital of Hue.

The newly arrived American forces would have to fight an NVA force that was not willing to cede any ground to them. Not only were their spirits strong in the Imperial City, but they continued to utilize the element of surprise. These surprise raids came at night and negatively affected the South Vietnamese forces. First, the raids would continue to hammer away at the morale of ARVN troops, but secondly ARVN battalions found themselves cut off and had to fight for days to get back to their headquarters. This is just a further example of how taxing the fighting in the Imperial City was.



Death in the Imperial City, Richard Camp, page 52.

Unfortunately, it would continue to get worse, as the North Vietnamese would not yield even after the South Vietnamese Air Force began to bomb the Imperial City. The determination that the North Vietnamese showed was not a shared attribute in their South Vietnamese counterpart. “The South Vietnamese soldiers began to lose their fighting spirit, and within the first week, they had, in effect,

⁴⁸ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 26.

⁴⁹ Camp, *Death*, 44.

circled their wagons and sat back to wait.”⁵⁰ This would compel the United States Marines to take over the fighting in the Imperial City, a city whose historical significance they could not fully understand.

The fighting in the Imperial City was hectic. Not only was it difficult because of the close quarter nature of the fighting, but also because of the difficulty of fighting in a cultural hub. From the beginning of the Battle of Hue, US forces were responsible for the southern portion of the city, to avoid destroying any important structures. However, once Marines’ responsibility shifted to the Imperial City, the strategy of only destroying a building if it was even suspected it house enemy troops had changed.⁵¹ The new strategy, whether by the use of air support or ground troops, was to avoid destroying the culturally valuable structures inside the old city.⁵² This made it difficult for the Marines to defeat an entrenched and hunkered down enemy.

While the North Vietnamese had been in the Imperial City for days, the Marines were fresh combatants within the walls. On February 12th the newly arrived 1st Battalion, 5th Marines (1/5 for short), under the command of Major Robert Thompson, departed from the MACVHQ and entered the Citadel from the north via the river, in hopes to begin retaking the city the following day. Not only would this be 1/5’s first experience within the city, but this was Major Thompson’s tenth day as the commander of the battalion; his predecessor was WIA.⁵³ The Marines were forced to enter the city further south than they had hoped due to the overwhelming enemy presence. Major Thompson would converse with ARVN General Truong about their plan of attack for the February 13th offensive. After failing to locate two South Vietnamese Airborne Battalions, it was decided that 1/5 would begin the offensive against the enemy at 8:00am the next day.

Once the offensive began, the US Marines quickly ran into an overpowering enemy force. They came under fire by AK-47 automatic rifles, B-40 rockets, and mortars under the control of NVA forces which had a commanding view of their placement from an archway tower at the Dong Ba Gate.⁵⁴ General Truong told Major Thompson that a South Vietnamese Airborne Battalion had supposedly gone through to secure the area; it was later revealed that this was not the case. The division had been relocated to Saigon at the orders of the Vietnamese Joint General Staff, because they were under the impression that because the Marines had arrived the Airborne division could be relieved of the fighting.⁵⁵ The incident, which cost the lives of Marines, was only a glimpse at the lack of communication between ARVN forces and the US military. Major Thompson made sure to express his frustrations with General Truong. During a call to Truong, Thompson revealed

⁵⁰ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 119.

⁵¹ Camp, *Death*, 39.

⁵² Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2018), 406.

⁵³ Camp, *Death*, 50.

⁵⁴ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 123.

⁵⁵ Nolan, *Battle for Hue*, 123.

that if he had known the Vietnamese division was gone, he would have planned differently⁵⁶ Despite the problems with communication, 1/5 had to continue to fight against a well-fortified, dug in enemy.

South Vietnamese Marines then arrived to aid in the retaking of the Citadel. With so many interconnected parts working for a specific goal, as well as so many different commanders attempting to work together, General Truong divided the Imperial City into six different zones, each of which were to be moved on by a different battalion. During the battle for the Citadel, ARVN troops were able to intercept a radio transmission ordering reinforcements to go into the Citadel and attack. The communist counter offensive was defeated with the aid of a Navy destroyer continuously firing for 10 minutes, resulting in a high-ranking NVA officer being killed.⁵⁷ The lost of the commanding officer was a blow to the NVA.

With the fighting in the Imperial City being so difficult, against an entrenched enemy with machine guns, in building to building fighting, it was necessary for Marines in the city to be supported. “We were in such close quarters with the enemy, often just meters away. We had no room to fire and maneuver. In essence, the fighting was an exercise of reducing fortified positions.”⁵⁸ On February 14th the hunkered down Marines used “5- and 8-inch Naval gunfire and 155mm and 8-inch howitzers to pave the way,” as well as received air support for the first time in multiple days.⁵⁹ The lack of air support was a common theme during the battle, as the weather throughout the operations was either rainy or foggy, and thus made it difficult to use air support.⁶⁰ Even with the air support, the offensive against the entrenched enemy at the east wall had made no progress. Thompson supported both the use of Naval guns and air support, but felt that the Naval guns were not helpful because of their inaccuracy due to their flat trajectory.⁶¹ With such heavy artillery firing toward the enemy, which was also close to friendlies, the Marine companies retreated slightly. As a result, the NVA pushed toward Thompson’s men, requiring his men to reconquer more ground. By the end of the day, the communists still held the Dong Ba gate tower.

Captain Myron Harrington, a relatively new member of Company D, saw the carnage caused by the battle for the east wall. “There were burnt-out tanks and trucks, and upturned automobiles still (from the previous day) smoldering. Bodies laid everywhere, most of them civilians. The smoke and stench blended, like some kind of horror movie.”⁶² Fortunately, the tower would fall on the 15th as a result of more artillery and Naval guns fired upon it, the same used the

⁵⁶ Camp, *Death*, 52.

⁵⁷ Camp, *Death*, 59.

⁵⁸ George W. Smith, *The Siege at Hue* (New York: Ballantine, 2001), 141.

⁵⁹ Camp, *Death*, 53. A howitzer is defined by Dictionary.com as “a cannon having a comparatively short barrel, used especially for firing shells at a high angle of elevation, as for reaching a target behind cover or in a trench.”

⁶⁰ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 26.

⁶¹ Camp, *Death*, 53.

⁶² Camp, *Death*, 54.

previous day, as well as air support dropping large bombs on the tower. After the bombing, Marines moved on the East Wall to clear out the remaining NVA. The enemy fought as determinedly as they had before the bombing. However, after a six hour fight, which included hand to hand combat, the East Wall was conquered by the Marines. That night the NVA would launch yet another surprise attack which resulted in them retaking the tower, only to lose it once more with a Marine counterattack. Reports on the number of casualties from this fight are all over the place, but one thing is certain, the communists suffered more KIA than the Saigon forces.⁶³ The tower had fallen but the battle for Hue was *still* not over.

The death and destruction seen at the East Wall was the same throughout the Imperial City. Captain Harrington captured the battle for the city with a sensory overload statement:

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. You couldn't bathe or shave either. 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.⁶⁴

Not only was this clearly the case in the Imperial City, but it was the sights, sounds, and smells felt throughout South Vietnam as a result of the Tet Offensive. Unfortunately, the Battle of Hue would continue for two more weeks in the Imperial City.

The next few weeks would be much different than the fighting that the Marines had experienced earlier in southern Hue. “NVA units in the Citadel employed better urban fighting tactics, had improved already formidable defenses, dug trenches, built roadblocks, and conducted counterattacks.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, the nature of the old city allowed the NVA to have access to buildings with thick walls, which also gave them cover from Marine gunfire. Because the Marines were not necessarily allowed to fire artillery like mortars, the fighting in the Imperial City seemed increasingly more difficult.

With such a formidable opponent still holding parts of the old city of Hue, Major Thompson had to shift his tactics. “In his mind, ‘the enemy had everything going for him’.”⁶⁶ In other words, with permission from a superior, American forces would begin to use heavy artillery, Naval gunfire, tear gas, and air support to support their ground attack against the entrenched NVA. Also aiding Saigon forces were tanks, as they would push in front of the front line, clear a path for

⁶³ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 61-64.

⁶⁴ Camp, *Death*, 56.

⁶⁵ Camp, *Death*, 56.

⁶⁶ Camp, *Death*, 57.

infantry to fire within, and then retreat back to friendly lines. Discovering this tactic was a trial and error process, as the shells the tanks originally used were 90mm, which were relatively ineffective against concrete. The tank crews would then shift to concrete-piercing fused shells, which would breach walls housing NVA after 2 to 4 rounds. The battalion and tank advance would halt due to lack of supplies; Thompson planned on resuming the offensive once the proper provision reached their lines.⁶⁷

As the battle raged on in the Imperial City, the Saigon forces were eager to end it as quickly as possible. In a meeting with top ranking military officials, including the South Vietnamese Vice President, it was concluded that the NVA were planning yet another major offensive against the city of Hue. Even after all the casualties suffered by the enemy, they were still willing to throw in more men to hold onto the city as long as possible. The South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky believed that the North Vietnamese were willing to sacrifice thousands of men to hold onto the city. As a result of the enemy's willingness to sustain casualties, Ky gave U.S. forces permission to destroy any and all buildings, including religious buildings, in order to defeat the enemy, as Ky would take full responsibility for their efforts. The willingness to sacrifice touched both sides as a result of the Battle of Hue.⁶⁸

The need to end the battle was becoming more obvious, as news articles and videos were appearing throughout the United States, showing the battle's bloodshed. To change the course of the battle, Major Thompson drafted a plan for a night offensive. The plan called for Company A of the 1st Battalion to liberate three key facilities at night, which included a two-story administrative building. In the morning, the rest of the battalion would launch an offensive like normal. The offensive began at night as planned, with minimal resistance. Company A was able to take their objectives successfully, this being a result of the NVA retreating to another location to sleep during the night. The lasting memories of the Battle of Hue linger with Marines to this day. "The first thing in the morning we saw six NVA... just standing on the wall. We dusted them all off."⁶⁹ The rest of February 21st had more resistance than the early morning. "By the end of the day, the battalion had killed 16 North Vietnamese, taken 1 prisoner, and captured five individual's weapons at a cost of 3 dead and 14 wounded."⁷⁰ The battalion was short of their original destination by 100 yards but would reach it the following day. With little resistance, Company A had the honor of attaching an American flag onto a telegraph pole.

Upon reaching the wall Thompson ordered a recently acquired company to move on the southern gate and secure it as well as the bridge. Just as on the previous day, this checkpoint would be reached with little to no resistance, besides the occasional sniper fire. The only miscue during

⁶⁷ Edward J. O'Neil, *Street Fighting: Lessons Learned from the Battle of Hue for 21st Century Urban Warfare* (M.A. thesis, 2002), 47.

⁶⁸ Camp, *Death*, 60-61.

⁶⁹ Camp, *Death*, 64.

⁷⁰ Camp, *Death*, 64.

the offensive was the dropping of napalm within 800 meters of the troops attempting to conquer the bridge.⁷¹ However, there was still fighting on the west side of the Imperial City.

Between the 22 and 23rd of February the Vietnamese Marines, the same Marines who aided in the liberation of the Citadel, were bogged down with a hard fighting NVA force. As a result, the task force moved half a block in 3 days. However, on February 24th at 5:00am local time ARVN forces pulled down the National Liberation Front flag that flew over the old Imperial City in Hue for 25 days. There was a small section of the Imperial City still under control by NVA going into the night of the 24th. This last pocket would be eliminated the morning of the 25th by a Vietnamese Marines surprise attack.⁷² The only fighting that was left would be either small skirmishes or small search and destroy missions conducted in and around Hue. Besides resistance from a NVA stronghold outside the city, the operations were rather uneventful. Once it was concluded that the city of Hue was cleared, two Marine battalions went east in hopes to cut off any enemy forces attempting to reach the coast. The attempt was futile, as no enemies were found. On March 2, 1968, Operation Hue City was completed.

In the end, the Battle of Hue was one of the bloodiest and longest in the whole Vietnam War, not just the Tet Offensive. The Vietnamese Marines suffered 88 killed and 350 wounded while the United States Marines suffered 142 dead and almost 1,100 wounded. The casualties would increase from there, as ARVN sustained 333 dead and 1,773 wounded and 30 missing from their fighting in the Imperial City. In total, the Saigon forces lost roughly 600 dead and had nearly 3,800 wounded and missing. On the other hand, NVA and Viet Cong numbers exceed that greatly. While the battle of Hue had involved roughly 11,000 NVA and Viet Cong participants, between 2,500 to 5,000 of those communist troops were killed. It would take years for the Viet Cong to be influential again after the Tet Offensive, but they would never again reach their pre-offensive strength. Furthermore, it is unfortunate that these numbers only list the military casualties, as citizens also died because of the battle.⁷³

One of the most shocking discoveries of the Battle of Hue was the number of civilian casualties. During their occupation of Hue, the North Vietnamese communists collected government officials, sympathizers, and foreigners, which including American civilians, in sections of the city they controlled. This was a result of them wanting to rid the city of any opponents to communist rule. Despite, or perhaps because of this, it was reported that no civilians offered to help the Marines throughout the battle for Hue.⁷⁴ Once the Saigon forces reconquered the city, mass graves were found which contained the rounded up Hue civilians. Roughly 3,000 bodies were found in quickly dug mass graves.⁷⁵ The wrath of the North Vietnamese did not end

⁷¹ Camp, *Death*, 64-65.

⁷² Camp, *Death*, 65.

⁷³ Camp, *Death*, 67.

⁷⁴ Marine Corps Historical Center, *Combat After Action Report*, 25.

⁷⁵ Camp, *Death*, 68.

there, as Marines said that they saw civilian bodies lying on the street the first few nights of the battle. Lance Corporal Ronald DeFore observed:

They (the North Vietnamese) seemed to have just slaughtered a lot of the families... you'd see whole families – which would be mother, father, and children – that were just killed, and they raped quite a few of the young women.... A mother said the NVA raped and killed her two daughters, 15 and 13.⁷⁶

Considering the countless residents of Hue that were missing, as well as the hunt for mass graves not yet being finished, it is estimated that as many as 6,000 civilians were killed during the North Vietnamese occupation.⁷⁷

Considering the casualties suffered by both sides during the Battle of Hue, it would seem as if the Saigon forces launched a successful counteroffensive to retake Hue. Although difficult, the urban fighting that the NVA took to during the Battle of Hue benefited American forces more than it did their own. The columnist Roscoe Drummond believed that the Tet offensive played into America's military strategy, because the communists abandoned their guerilla tactics and switched to conventional combat.⁷⁸ The results in terms of the military body count were clear; the Saigon forces won the Battle of Hue and the Tet Offensive. However, Hanoi's two goals when launching the offensive did not consider casualties sustained, as one of their goals was to encourage the US to scale back its military presence. The NVA was able to achieve this goal, as the number of US military personnel would peak in 1968 and dwindle until the end of the war.

The Battle of Hue showed top US military officials what the NVA were capable of and showed weak spots in the strategy that the US was using when conducting the war. "Tet revealed the enemy's courage and great skill in planning and coordination," but also "the speed and degrees of the enemy offensive in Hue caught the South Vietnamese and American commands off guard."⁷⁹ Furthermore, a guerilla force was able to infiltrate previously secure areas, fend off American and South Vietnamese counteroffensives and occupy a major city in Southern Vietnam for 25 days where they were able to commit one of the worst atrocities in Southeast Asian history.

Studies were conducted after the conclusion of the battle about how things could have been done differently. "If the enemy had blown the An Cuu Bridge across Route 1 on the first day, the Marines would not have been able to bring their initial battalions and supplies into the city."⁸⁰ If the bridge had been destroyed, the battle would have raged on longer and more lives would have been lost. When dealing with the Perfume River, which US forces used to bring in supplies during

⁷⁶ Camp, *Death*, 68.

⁷⁷ David Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 98-99.

⁷⁸ Gilbert and Head, *The Tet Offensive*, 139.

⁷⁹ Gilbert and Head, *The Tet Offensive*, 25; Camp, *Death*, 75.

⁸⁰ Camp, *Death*, 68.

the battle via boat, it was concluded that the North Vietnamese did not do as much as they could have to hinder American supply lines. The NVA made no serious attempts to blockade the river, resulting in more than 400 tons of supplies being delivered via water and 500 more tons of supplies being brought into the city by helicopter.⁸¹ Just as the North Vietnamese poured in countless amounts of supplies into the battle, so too did American forces.

The strategies used when conducting Operation Hue City were clearly capable of recapturing the city, but what more could have been done to win the city back more quickly? A lack of an overall commander meant that there was no umbrella strategy to the battle. Even with General Truong controlling operations in the Citadel, the lack of an overlord caused a great deal of clashing between commanders within the city of Hue. These included different ideas on how to retake the new city, what to do about the Perfume River, and how to go about cutting supply lines coming into the city. To say that the battle would have been quicker with a commanding overlord is dubious, however that is not to say that the Saigon forces would not have benefited.

Further results of the Battle of Hue and the Tet offensive include two major events which go hand in hand. First, prominent CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite traveled to Vietnam, including Hue and Saigon, during the Tet offensive to experience the fighting first hand. Once his visit was finished, he broadcast his findings to the nation. Cronkite shocked the country when he announced that the United States was not closer to victory, nor further from defeat, but stuck in a stalemate. “The only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy and did the best they could.”⁸² As a result of the broadcast, President Lyndon Johnson famously said that, “if I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America.” Not only because of Cronkite’s report, but without a doubt aided by the Tet Offensive, President Johnson announced at the end of March that he would not seek reelection.

In conclusion, the Battle of Hue and the Tet Offensive changed modern American history. It shocked Americans to see the type of war that their boys were going through half way around the world. The offensive completely changed the way that the war would be fought for the rest of 1968 until the conclusion of the war in 1975. Leading up to the launching of the offensive, the Americans had an approach that they thought could win the war. However, because of the Battle of Hue and the Tet Offensive, that strategy changed. The new strategy was to find a way to leave Vietnam as quickly as possible. “The urban battle for Hue, South Vietnam, although only one of hundreds of different attacks on the Tet Offensive, affected the will of both the American people and their political leadership.”⁸³ Rather than winning the war, the United States goal now was to withdraw from Vietnam and not lose the war. This strategy would include President Richard Nixon’s Vietnamization Policy. In the end, the Vietnam War would last almost a decade, cost billions of dollars, and cost the lives of thousands of Americans.

⁸¹ Camp, *Death*, 69.

⁸² Walter Cronkite, “Report from Vietnam,” *CBS News*, February 27, 1968.

⁸³ *Urban Operations* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 2006).

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