



Storming the City: U.S. Military Performance in Urban Warfare from World War II to Vietnam by Alec Wahlman.

Denton: Univ. of North Texas Press, 2015. Pp. xvi, 368. ISBN 978-1-57441-619-0.

Review by Samuel B. Hoff, Delaware State University (shoff@desu.edu).

Military historian Alec Wahlman (Inst. for Defense Analyses) specializes in irregular warfare, modeling and simulation, and, particularly, urban warfare. In *Storming the City*, he evaluates four major urban battles—Aachen (1944), Manila (1945), Seoul (1950), and Hue (1968)—involving American forces.¹ His assessments of US capabilities and performance in these battles reveals a degradation of tactical effectiveness over time.

In his introduction, Waldman notes that, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the US military had lessened its role in suppressing urban dissent. In chapter 1, “Urban Warfare in American Military Thought before Aachen,” he argues that, prior to World War II, “the US Army did have some experience with urban operations, but it proved an insufficient catalyst for prompting significant changes in doctrine or force structure” (14).

Beginning with chapter 2, on Aachen, the author sets the pattern of his case-study analyses: after presenting the background and immediate context of the battle, he evaluates issues of command and control, communications, intelligence and reconnaissance, firepower and survivability, mobility and countermobility, logistics, and relations with the civilian population.

Aachen was symbolically important because it was the first German city threatened by Allied ground forces. It had real strategic value, since the “Aachen Gap” led to the Ruhr industrial region. With a force one-third the size of Aachen’s defenders, the Americans secured the surrender of the Germans after locating the headquarters of their commander. The US forces’ isolation of the city was key to their victory, despite their having underestimated the German defenders, ammunition shortages, communications problems, and the limited value of their wheeled vehicles. Wahlman credits as well the performance of American small unit leaders.

We learn in chapter 3 that, after US forces landed in northern Luzon (Jan. 1945), it took them a month to reach Manila and another month to clear the city. Japanese defenders, taken by surprise, suffered from an ill-defined command structure and lack of reinforcements. They used residents of Manila as shields against American firepower, killing some 100,000 civilians in the process. Though the Manila operation was neither rapid nor error-free, “a number of American general war-fighting competencies proved applicable in the urban environment” (117).

The Seoul mission, discussed in chapter 5,² occurred against a backdrop of post-World War II military demobilizations, funding reductions, and a fixation on atomic weapons. Training in urban warfare was not a priority. After the Inchon landing (Sept. 1950), US Marines had to overcome major resistance to reach their target city, Seoul. They had trouble tracking North Korean units, were slow to isolate the city, and misjudged their enemies’ will to hold their ground; hence they sustained over

1. He has consulted relevant archives at the Military History Institute, the National Archives, the Center for Military History, Forts Leavenworth and Benning, and the Virtual Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

2. Chapter 4 concerns “Urban Warfare in American Military Thought after World War II.”

four hundred casualties in one week of fighting. Still, the “battle for Seoul was a decisive point in the Korean War, and probably the most operationally important urban battle in US military history” (180).

Like Seoul, Hue, the subject of chapter 6, was a transportation hub with special cultural significance to the native population in Vietnam. In July 1967, communist leaders were planning the Tet offensive, which would include attacks on most provincial capitals and major cities like Saigon and Hue, the latter close to the border between North and South Vietnam. On 31 January 1968, a combination of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops attacked Hue. Though the initial response of American and South Vietnamese (ARVN) defenders was swift, “both the size of the enemy force then in Hue, and their willingness to stand and fight, far exceeded US assumptions” (191). Bad weather and ill-advised rules of engagement were exacerbated by an overwhelmed command structure and a failure to interdict enemy resupply efforts. When the fighting ceased, five thousand communists had been killed along with three thousand civilians. American losses were 142 dead and 857 wounded; ARVN casualties were some three times those numbers. Tet also had dire political consequences for the administration of President Lyndon Johnson.

In his conclusion, Wahlman compares his four urban battles and projects future trends in urban warfare. He identifies two traits as essential to victory: transferable competence and adaptability. While superior firepower benefited American forces in all the battles, intelligence gathering was a persistent challenge. And logistical problems hampered American performance at Hue, as did dealing with the civilian population at Manila.

After discussing American urban warfare in Somalia (1993) and Iraq (2003), Wahlman cautions that the United States should treat it as a last resort rather than the norm. He argues, too, that the US military must be flexible and adept in the use of advanced technology when it does decide to conduct urban fighting.

The book has its shortcomings. Its illustrations, though plentiful, are all in black and white; the quality of the map program is subpar as well. More substantively, the inclusion of Hue involves some discontinuities. In Wahlman’s first three case studies, American forces initiated each battle, whereas Hue was clearly a counteroffensive. As a consequence, US forces had trouble stopping communist reinforcements and distinguishing enemy personnel from innocent civilians inside the city. Wahlman’s comparison of Hue’s aftermath with the North Vietnamese attack at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 highlights the uniqueness of Hue among his case-studies.

Overall, Alec Wahlman is right to stress the benefits of modeling and simulations in grasping the intricacies of urban warfare. Still, the record of American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan makes it painfully clear that, despite their adaptability to conditions of urban terrain, such combat should be kept to a minimum.³

3. For other recent studies of the theory and practice of urban warfare, see, e.g., John Antal, *City Fights: Selected Histories of Urban Combat from World War II to Vietnam* (NY: Presidio Pr, 2003), Kendall D. Gott, *Breaking the Mold: Tanks in the Cities* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Inst Pr, 2006), Stephen Bull, *World War II Street-Fighting Tactics* (Oxford: Osprey, 2008), Louis DiMarco, *Concrete Hell: Urban Warfare From Stalingrad to Iraq* (Oxford: Osprey, 2012), Robert W. Baumer, *Aachen: The U.S. Army’s Battle for Charlemagne’s City in World War II* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2015).