

# History Of Urban Conflicts In The 20th Century

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.

- Carl Von Clausewitz

The advancement in technology was first demonstrated when the guns and cannons were first used in war and therefore the asymmetry in the opposing forces became apparent. This led to development of strategy and tactics – primarily to take cover and fight with surprise and concealment. The cities offered best cover since one could take advantage of the man made obstructions and one could also mingle with the crowds. Possibly the biggest advantage accrued due to the readily available means to support oneself. When compared to safe havens in jungles and mountains or inhospitable terrain – living off the land became a prime concern. Additionally, substantial organic fire could be brought to bear on the adversary in this setting since there was no apprehension of collateral damage. Therefore, the wars progressively shifted to cities. It is in this backdrop that historical approach must be studied and the lessons learnt in these conflicts.

2. Some of the major battles fought in the 20th and 21st Centuries are covered in brief in the succeeding paragraphs<sup>1</sup>.

(a) Stalingrad (1942-43). The battle of Stalingrad epitomises the vagaries of urban battle. In this battle the Soviets resolutely defended this city penalised the attacking Germans greatly so much that it allowed a decisive counteroffensive. This classic urban battle resulted in more than 1.6 million casualties. This battle was fought between large forces and some good innovative urban combat techniques were used successfully. This battle also saw the creation of the Storm Groups (task-organized assault units) which were highly successful. The battle lasted more than 30 days. Possibly, this battle marked the beginning of the end of German successes in WWII.

(b) Ortona (1943). This battle was fought in an Italian town between the German 3rd Parachute Regiment and the attacking Canadian Army during WWII. The unfamiliarity of the Canadians with urban combat was exposed and this therefore called for development of new tactics in the face of enemy. This battle demonstrated that a battalion, in well prepared defences could hold an entire regiment for 6-13 days and inflict casualties in hundreds on the attackers. The determined resistance of the Germans thus resulted in large scale destruction of the town they had had extracted a

high cost both in time and casualties to the attackers. Having inflicted casualties in hundreds and delaying the Canadians offensive plans the Germans withdrew.

(c) Aachen (1944). In the fall of 1944 the battle for Aachen, Germany, was fought by the U.S. First Army Division. The objective was to breach the Westwall defences and the vaunted Siegfried Line. Aachen was the first city on German soil to be attacked by the Allies and thus had psychological ramifications for Germans. Thus, the Germans offered tenacious resistance to the attackers. After 14-30 days of pitched battle between the two armies, the Germans did surrender but only after the city was destroyed. While the U.S. Army did achieve a clear tactical victory yet it costed them valuable time and this delayed their subsequent planned attack to the Rhine river. The urban battle resulted in more than 8,000 casualties.

(d) Arnhem (1944). During the Operation Market-Garden, WWII, historically the largest airborne operations was launched in the Netherlands. The objective was to seize three key bridges in a 100 km long corridor so that the mechanised forces then could pass through this secure approach for a final decisive offensive into Germany. The bridges were to be secured by the three airborne divisions. As per the plan the British 1st Airborne Division made a surprise landing close to the Dutch city of Arnhem to capture a bridge over the Rhine for the advancing British army. German armour force, with surprise and using the cover of city, counterattacked and neutralised all footholds, virtually obliterating the British force before a linkup could occur. The battle lasted for 13 days and resulted in casualties in the thousands.

(e) Cherbourg (1944). This is a classical example of use of urban environment to defeat a very large force. The battle was fought between the U.S. forces and the defending four Divisions of German Army. The US forces advanced from Normandy beachhead to Cherbourg and they succeeded in cutting off defending German forces in the Cotentin Peninsula. The Germans withdrew to outskirts and surrounded Cherbourg. After much fighting, particularly in strong points outside the city, the German garrison surrendered to the Americans. However, the port facilities were destroyed, preventing planned early use by Allied forces during a critical period of time. The battle lasted for 13 days and the casualties were reported to be in thousands.

(f) Berlin (1945). Effectively, the last battle of WW II, in Europe was fought between the Germans and the Soviets in the German capital city. It was long and a bloody fight between the two forces primarily due to the settings or else the Soviets would have managed to achieve their objectives in shorter time with lesser attrition. Although, bitter fighting occurred but since the defence was not well coordinated, they eventually lost the battle. In fact, the Germans had poor preparation for such a battle. The battle lasted for 30 days and the casualties were in thousands.

(g) Manila (1945). This battle highlighted that even poorly trained and equipped army can also give a good fight to a much superior force in the urban settings. The battle was fought between the advancing American forces and the defending Japanese Army

troops in Manila. Due to intense pressure from the advancing adversary the Japanese troops evacuated but the local Japanese naval commander independently decided to hold the city at all costs. Despite defending Manila with poorly trained and equipped personnel, a resolute confrontation resulted in a high number of casualties to the attacking U.S. forces as well as the destruction of the city and much of its population. The battle lasted for 30 days and resulted in more than casualties 22,000.

(h) Seoul (1950). The battle was fought between the US forces with Republic of Korea forces and North Koreans. The objective was to seize the South Korean capital city. The fighting was atypical in that the combat was mostly centred on capture of street barricades rather than buildings. The battle lasted 13 days and resulted in 2,383 casualties of the U.S. Marines and others in thousands.

(j) Jerusalem (1967). Israeli forces captured Jerusalem in a well-planned and executed operation. Despite an uncoordinated Jordanian defence, Israeli casualties in this battle were the highest suffered during the Six Day War. Regular Jordanian forces withdrew during the latter stages of the battle, effectively ending organized resistance. The battle lasted for 5 days and the Israeli forces suffered more than 400 casualties. The casualties of the Jordanian Forces are estimated to be in the hundreds.

(k) Hue (1968). On 31 January 1968, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) forces launched their Tet Offensive at targets throughout South Vietnam. As part of this operation, two NVA/VC regiments and two sapper battalions conducted a surprise attack and seized part of the walled city (Citadel) of Hue. The NVA/VC held this part of The Citadel for about 3 weeks against determined U.S. and South Vietnamese attempts to retake it before succumbing. The battle for Hue is considered to be one of the most intense and savage battles of the Vietnam conflict. Length of battle: 14-30 days. Casualties: U.S. Marines 433, others 5,000 plus.

(l) Quang Tri City I and II (1972). An objective of the North Vietnamese winter-spring offensive was the capture of Quang Tri, the northernmost major city of South Vietnam. The NVA overwhelmed the Army, Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) defenders (I), but later the city was recaptured (II) by a smaller ARVN force, albeit with extensive artillery and air support. The large conventional forces involved on both sides make these the major urban battles of the Vietnam conflict. Length of battle: Quang Tri I 6-13 days, Quang Tri II 30 days or greater. Casualties: battles combined 30,000 plus.

(m) Suez City (1973). Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) attempted to seize this Egyptian city before the anticipated United Nations (UN) ceasefire, to end the Yom Kippur War. IDF armoured shock tactics led to disaster against a well-prepared Egyptian defence. High casualties forced the IDF to withdraw. Length of battle: less than 24 hours. Casualties: IDF estimated 100-500, others unknown.

(n) Ban Me Thuot (1975). This South Vietnam highlands town was the first strategic city to fall in the final, decisive North Vietnamese general offensive. South Vietnamese

forces were surprised and overwhelmed. The fall of Ban Me Thuot resulted in a rout that the North Vietnamese exploited to achieve total victory in Vietnam. Length of battle: 24-48 hours. Casualties: estimated in the hundreds.

(p) Beirut I (1976). When the Lebanese civil war broke out in the spring of 1975, combat in the capital city of Beirut assumed a central role. The battle for Beirut I was a series of small, local operations between largely irregular Christian and Muslim forces fighting over control of the hotel and port districts. Combat was not decisive, but led to changes in the boundary, called the "Green Line," separating the antagonists and subsequent stagnation of the Lebanese conflict. Length of battle: greater than 30 days. Casualties: estimated in the hundreds.

(q) Tel Zaatar (1976). Lebanese Christian attackers encircled and leisurely besieged this Palestinian camp before overcoming its defenders with a final assault. Length of battle: greater than 30 days. Casualties: estimated in the hundreds.

(r) Ashrafiyeh (1978). The Syrian forces occupying portions of Lebanon faced a complex political situation in which the power of the Christian militia was seen as a clear threat to stability. In an attempt to weaken the Christians by an attack on their centre of power, the Syrians laid siege to the Christian stronghold of East Beirut (Ashrafiyeh). This urban battle was essentially an artillery bombardment without air attacks. Syria failed to break the will of the defenders and final positions remained unchanged. Length of battle: greater than 30 days. Casualties: estimated in the hundreds.

(s) Khorramshahr (1980). Iranian regular forces initially evacuated this port city in the face of an Iraqi offensive. Irregular Iranian forces, however, continued to fight. They offered prolonged resistance and inflicted heavy casualties. Iraq eventually won this battle, but at a high cost in time and resources that ultimately served to halt the entire offensive against Iran. The battle for Khorramshahr was later referred to by both combatant forces as the "City of Blood.: Length of battle: 14-30 days. Casualties: Iraqi 3,000-9,000, Iranian estimated in the thousands.

(t) Beirut II (1982). The siege of Beirut culminated the Israeli campaign to evict the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon. Fighting under domestic and world political pressures, the IDF besieged the PLO, selectively applying heavy ground and air firepower in conjunction with psychological warfare and limited-objective ground operations. The fighting resulted in a negotiated PLO evacuation from the city. Length of battle: greater than 30 days. Casualties: 2,300 plus.

(u) Sidon (1982). Israeli forces easily seized this PLO southern headquarters during the invasion of Lebanon. The IDF was fully prepared for major urban combat using lessons learned from earlier battles, but resistance was unexpectedly light as PLO forces had largely withdrawn from the city. Length of battle: 48 hours to 5 days. Casualties: unknown.

(w) Tyre (1982). The Israeli attack on the PLO in this Lebanese coastal city was well-planned and with excellent intelligence on the target. All branches of the IDF participated in an operation that included naval fire support and amphibious landings. PLO resistance was uncoordinated and relatively easily overcome. Length of battle: 48 hours to 5 days. Casualties: IDF 120 plus, others unknown.

3. Having seen the various urban battles in the last century, let us take an in depth look at three campaigns and lessons learnt thereof. These battles are discussed to illustrate the trends, dominant factors, and principles of combat in urbanized areas.<sup>2</sup>

#### Somali Peace Operations (1992-93)

4. The UN forces were tasked to capture or eliminate Aideed, a self appointed country's chief and the most powerful warlord in the region. However, he did not have UN backing and this caused confrontation between the two forces. On the night of October 3, 1993, a company of U.S. Rangers and a Delta Force commando squadron fast-roped onto a gathering of HabrGidr clan leaders in the heart of Mogadishu, Somalia. The targets were two of Aideed's top lieutenants. The plan was to secure any hostages and transport them three miles back to base on a convoy of twelve vehicles. What was supposed to be a hostage snatch mission quickly turned into an eighteen-hour firefight when two Blackhawk helicopters crashed. Eighteen Americans were killed in the fighting.

5. The helicopter assault force included about 75 Rangers and 40 Delta Force troops in 17 helicopters. The light infantry force on the ground was armed with small arms; the relieving convoys had nothing heavier than HMMWV-mounted .50 caliber machine guns and automatic grenade launchers. Close air support consisted of Black-hawk and Little Bird (AH-6) gunships. The Somalis were armed with assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). The Somalis knew that after the Rangers fast-roped in they would not be able to come back out on helicopters (the streets were too narrow). This meant a relief convoy would be necessary, so they immediately began setting up roadblocks all over the city.

6. The mission went very well at first. Twenty-four quickly seized at the target house. Plans to haul them back to the airport base changed dramatically when a Blackhawk helicopter (Super 6-1) was shot down four blocks east of the target house. Soon a second Blackhawk, Super 6-4, was shot down about a mile away. The Mogadishu firefight started with a special-purpose raid by a company-sized element of U.S. commandos to abduct hostages from Mohammed Aideed's Somali clan. The mission went awry after two Blackhawk helicopters were shot down. Thousands of Somali guerillas and civilians swarmed around the embattled U.S. commandos and convoys sent in to rescue them. Eighteen Americans were killed.

7. Lessons Learnt. Aideed's victory was due to several factors. The nature of the urban terrain had an inhibiting effect on U.S. situational awareness and firepower. The support

of the indigenous population for their militia helped to conceal insurgents and hinder the use of airpower. Somali RPGs changed the whole course of the mission when two U.S. Black-hawks were downed. The absence of heavier U.S. armor and lack of combined arms were sorely felt, especially when roadblocks needed to be cleared. Finally, the Somalis were willing to take casualties and could afford to follow their costly swarm tactics.

#### Operation Just Cause, Panama (1989)

8. During Operation Just Cause (OJC) American joint forces attacked the Panamanian Defence Force (PDF) using strict ROE. Combat actions included airfield seizures and deliberate attacks on fortified positions. Urban targets were positioned among the cities, airports, military bases, and rural areas.

9. On December 19, 1989, units from the Army, Navy, and Air Force assaulted 27 critical objectives throughout Panama, the largest airborne operation since World War II. Initial targets included PDF concentrations, garrisons, and airports, as well as media, transportation, and command and control nodes. Joint Task Force South conducted the attack with the 13,000 U.S. troops already garrisoned in Panama and another 13,000 deployed troops from the United States. The major targets were the locations of PDF reinforcements, two airfields, a few bridges, a naval base, and the main PDF stronghold in Panama City, La Comandancia. US Special Forces also attempted to snatch Noriega himself.

10. The Ranger assault on the Rio Hato military base was one of the biggest firefights of OJC. Two battalions of Rangers parachuted into the Panamanian military base, located about 75 miles west of Panama City, The Ranger light infantry was supported by a pair of new Apaches, a Spectre gunship, AH-6 "Little Bird" helicopters, and Stealth F-117As. The fighting in the barracks area was classic MOUT—building to building, room to room. The PDF fought stubbornly, retreating out the rear of buildings to ambush the pursuing Rangers from gullies and other cover. In this action, the Rangers lost 4 dead and 18 wounded (another 23 had been injured in the jump), but they killed 34 PDF soldiers, captured 362, and detained 43 civilians.<sup>17</sup>

11. OJC could easily have turned into a nightmare for U.S. planners. Noncombatant casualties, especially American civilians, were a major concern. Many Americans lived, worked, or went to school right next to Panamanians. One of the task forces involved in the operation, Task Force Atlantic, was solely responsible for the safety of a thousand Americans living on joint U.S.-Panamanian military installations or in civilian housing.<sup>18</sup>

12. For Operation Just Cause as a whole, 23 American soldiers and 3 American civilians were killed, and 324 were wounded. At least 314 PDF soldiers were killed in the fighting, and between 200 and 300 Panamanian civilians perished.<sup>19</sup>

13. Lessons Learnt. OJC was a decisive American victory for many reasons. However, PDF still managed to inflict substantial injury on the American forces. This despite the fact that neither the PDF were well trained, equipped nor were they well organised. The major contributor was the environment in which the asymmetry was neutralised to some extent.

#### The Battle for Grozny (December 1994-January 1995)

14. The Chechen War was fought between Chechen insurgents seeking independence and the Russian army, air force, and internal security forces. This two-year guerrilla war ran the gamut of urban operations, from small-scale Chechen raids into the Russian cities of Budyonnovsk and Kizlyar-Pervomaiskoye to high-intensity MOUT within the city of Grozny. The two major battles for Grozny involved tens of thousands of Russian soldiers and hundreds of tanks. Over 6,000 Russian soldiers were killed overall.

15. Disregarding proper combined arms tactics, Russian armored vehicles drove into Grozny without deploying dismounted infantry support, allowing Chechen infantry to ambush the tanks in the spearhead. In the 131st Motorized Brigade, only 18 out of 120 vehicles escaped destruction. Without infantry, Russian tanks were easy pickings for the waiting Chechens armed with RPGs:

The Russians stayed in their armor, so we just stood on the balconies and dropped grenades on to their vehicles as they drove by underneath. The Russians are cowards. They can't bear to come out of shelter and fight us man-to-man. They know they are no match for us. That is why we beat them and will always beat them.<sup>28</sup>

16. Special shock troops, paratroopers, motorized infantry units, and marines systematically pushed the Chechens back building by building. This initial battle for Grozny lasted several weeks. Combat operations broke down into small unit firefights because of the nonlinear nature of urban terrain. Commanders sometimes could not exercise command and control over adjacent units because of a lack of common corridors or entrances. If a Russian unit advanced too far (or adjacent units fell back), it was cut off, surrounded, and attacked by Chechens, like "wasps on a ripe pear."<sup>30</sup>

17. Later a pattern set in: the Chechens would hide in basements during the daylight barrages, then emerge for hit and run attacks at night.

It was not until the 21st that Russian task forces Group West and Group East fought their way to the center of Grozny, at which point they basically controlled about half the city. Grozny was finally cleared of rebels around late February.

## Russian Strategy and Tactics

18. Since the Chechen War evolved over several weeks of combat and was far larger in scope than Operation Just Cause and the Mogadishu firefight, the development of strategy and tactics deserves a special mention.

19. The Russian strategy that evolved was to bully the cooperation of the people in order to cut off support for the Chechen fighters. Towns and villages were pounded from the air until they signed individual truces with Russian forces.

Their poor tactics in the first assault on Grozny notwithstanding, the Russians had a well-developed doctrine for urban warfare based on their extensive experience both before and after World War II.<sup>34</sup> The problem was that urban operation skills were a lost art among most active duty soldiers because MOUT training was almost nonexistent. Eventually they did manage to relearn the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) involved in isolating a city, establishing a foothold, and clearing the city sector by sector. They used direct-fire artillery, RPGs, automatic grenade fire, and machine guns to provide suppressive fire, smoke bombs to cover approaches to building objectives, demolitions to create entryways, and small teams of infantry to clear buildings room by room. Special assault units proved to be the most effective fighting formations.<sup>35</sup>

## Chechen Strategy and Tactics

20. For the Chechens an outright military victory was unlikely, so their goal was to inflict as many casualties as possible on the Russian people and erode their will to fight. The Chechens used an "asymmetric" strategy that avoided battle in the open against Russian armor, artillery, and airpower. They sought to even the fight by fighting an infantry war. Time and again, the Chechens forced their Russian counterparts to meet them on the urban battlefield where a Russian infantryman could die just as easily as a Chechen fighter.

21. The Chechen strategy has been described as the battle for "successive cities." After Grozny fell, the Chechens moved their operations base to Argun, Shall, and other cities to continue the battle of urban attrition. Dudayev deliberately used cities throughout Chechnya as strategic strong points from which to defend his country. As one Chechen put it, "We were very happy they came into the city because we cannot fight them in an open field."

22. Overall, the Chechens used a mobile area defense. A fixed defense based on strong points was vulnerable to Russian firepower, so the Chechens relied more on a fluid and elusive hit-and-run defense. The mobile Chechens used back alleys, sewers, basements, and destroyed buildings to slip around and through Russian lines. Chechen vehicle detachments transported supplies, weapons, and personnel quickly and easily

throughout Grozny. Chechen artillery deployed near schools or hospitals, fired a few rounds, and dispersed to avoid counterbatteryfire.<sup>40</sup>

23. Extensive use of the ambush, fighting at night, and the use of antitank hunter-killer teams were the hallmarks of Chechen tactics. Roving bands of 10-15 men (who could further subdivide into 3- to 4-man cells) would swarm toward the sound of Russian engines and volley fire RPG-7 and RPG-18 antitank missiles from upper-floor windows. Chechens used classic ambush techniques: wait for a column of vehicles to wander all the way into a kill zone, take out the leading and trailing vehicles to create a trap, and finish off the rest of the vehicles one by one, shooting any survivors as they bailed out. Russian tank armor proved vulnerable to top attack. The Chechens also booby-trapped bodies, buildings, and obstacles—anything that Russian soldiers might have to move or clean up.

24. During the Chechen counterattack on Grozny, the Russians lost 500 dead, 1,407 wounded, 182 missing, and an unknown number of casualties among the 300,000 civilians present. Political will power for the war evaporated. By the end of August, Russian national security adviser Alexander Lebed had brokered a peace deal with Chechen commander Asian Maskhadov that avoided declaring a victory for either side. It was plain to all who the victor was when all Russian forces were ordered to evacuate Grozny.

25. Lessons Learnt. The Russians paid heavily for their attacks on the cities of Chechnya for many reasons, most of them related to the steady erosion of the Russian military since the end of the Cold War.<sup>51</sup> Given the number of problems, it would be tedious to list every possible factor that might have influenced the outcome. There were many problems: poor command and control, a shortage of troops, poor training, the refusal of units and commanders to execute orders, low morale, and poor logistics are but a few. This analysis merely describes the significant factors that determined the outcome of this war. Poor tactics was certainly the main reason for excessive early losses. Sending Russian armor straight into Grozny without infantry support allowed the Chechens to ambush Russian vehicles from overlooking buildings and street corners. The Russians also suffered from poor unity of command at all levels, highlighted by the absurd example of Yeltsin's declaration of a cease-fire while Russian military commanders simultaneously launched offensive attacks.

## CONCLUSION

26. The strategic ramifications of this battle persist. The U.S. decision to withdraw from Somalia after losing relatively few soldiers has had unintended consequences—many adversaries now question American resolve and its obsession with casualties. In a May 28, 1998, ABC news interview, the terrorist Osama bin Laden echoed this sentiment:

We have seen in the last decade the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier who is ready to wage cold wars and unprepared to

fight long wars. This was proven In Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions. It also proves they can run in less than 24 hours, and this was also repeated in Somalia.<sup>9</sup>

27. These battles very clearly bring out that in case the forces are evenly matched the attacking force has a very low chance of a victory in urban terrain. This was amply proved in most of the battles in WWII. From the other battles it can be seen that the urban environment proves to be the choice for all the asymmetric engagements. Coupled with this is the fact that the only seize of city marks the victory in battles, therefore fighting in urban terrain cannot be wished away. Some of the events have not only shaped the battle outcome but also shaped the world's history – US withdrew from Somalia after suffering unacceptable attrition in the urban battles. Similarly, the Russians were comprehensive defeated by Chechens and this has been a bone of contention ever since. In conclusion it can be said that the urban environment offers great advantages to the inferior forces and therefore would be the natural choice for the future conflicts.