

Old Tactic, New threat: The Use of the Siege as an Answer to High Casualties of Urban Combat

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Old Tactic, New threat:  
The Use of the Siege as an Answer to High Casualties of  
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## Report Documentation Page

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*The worst policy is to attack cities. Attack cities only when there is no alternative.*

-Sun Tzu

### **Siege of Beirut, 1982**

After the invasion of Southern Lebanon by the Israeli Defense forces (IDF), the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) fell back into the capital of Beirut and fortified the city for the expected IDF attack. However, instead of being drawn into a bloody urban fight the Israelis chose to besiege the city and use firepower and political negotiation to achieve their objectives.<sup>i</sup> Israeli minister of Defense Ariel Sharon commented on the problems of siege tactics in modern war.

[In Beirut] a decently trained army could make the cost of any invasion prohibitive, and meanwhile rockets and long-range artillery could destroy life in Northern Israel. If it is possible to convince them by shutting off water, electricity, and fuel-supply this is better than street battles and better than putting our foot soldiers at risk...The PLO quickly began a reinforcement effort almost immediately, terrorists from all over began to arrive into Syrian positions east of the corridor; volunteers from Syria, Libya, Iraq, and even Iran all of them intent on getting into Beirut to join the PLO in their West Beirut redoubts...Israeli units were sitting in the strategic center of the country separating Syrian forces in and out of Beirut and eliminating any hope the PLO might have had for relief from the outside. We were now in a position to forcefully pressure our goal in the negotiations...My opinion was that we should take the PLO and act against them with all the firepower we have with all of our air force, with all of our artillery, and utterly destroy them. The Israeli government knew that the world's television cameras were showing dramatic images everyday of the Israeli army besieging Beirut. Civilian suffering was appalling, but the rest of us knew that those same cameras would never present the reality of why we were there. The years of horrific terrorism from Beirut, the attempted destruction of the Israeli north, the PLO build up of katyusha rockets. In reaction to this adverse press they were fearful for Israel's public image and they believed that additional IDF advances would only tarnish the image more. Beyond that as the siege of Beirut lengthened, pressure inside Israel itself was growing, street demonstrations, media attacks and criticism inside the Knesset were building quickly, partly the pressure came from people who naively thought they could put a stop to the war without concluding the situation in Beirut. We had to move ahead and finish it (the siege), because now the war was no longer popular; media attacks had become savage and demonstrations were rocking the streets.<sup>ii</sup>

For the past decade, the Marine Corps has been studying the problem of urban combat. The projected statistic that

85% of the world's population will be living in urban areas near the littorals by 2025, means that urban combat will be more and more of a reality.<sup>iii</sup> This trend was evidenced by the recent battle of Falluja, where Marine and Army casualties in the opening days of the battle were in the hundreds.<sup>iv</sup> The Marine Corps must deal with the high casualties of Military Operations Urban Terrain (MOUT) expected in the future by reviving a tactic as old as warfare itself: the siege.

### **THE MOUT PROBLEM**

Exercises such as Urban Warrior and Project Metropolis have illustrated the high number of potential casualties that a city fight could produce. Estimates put possible numbers of casualties as high as 80%.<sup>v</sup> The current examples of Nasiraya and Falluja show that casualties are inevitable even with low numbers of enemies occupying the cities. Col. Mark Thiffault, former Director of Joint Information Bureau, concerning Urban Warrior effectively summed up the MOUT problem.

Our enemies...know they cannot engage the United States with conventional methods. These potential foes view cities as a way to limit the technological advantages of our military. They know that cities, with their narrow streets, confusing layout and large number of civilian non-combatants, place limits on our technological superiority and especially our use of firepower. We have to develop technologies that allow us to win while minimizing collateral damage.<sup>vi</sup>

While the Marine Corps struggles to come to grips with the realities of MOUT, current tactics offer Marines scant advice.

## CURRENT TACTICS

Currently, USMC tactics for urban combat suggests that Marines will "...improve our chances of success. If we plan properly, execute decisively and maintain situational awareness..."<sup>vi</sup> This catchall advice reflects that military thinking has not yet dealt with the reality of the MOUT problem. Yet, doctrine admits "...regardless of size or quality of the defensive forces the defender usually extracts large costs from the attacker in time, resources, and casualties."<sup>viii</sup>

Along with seeking technical solutions to the tactical problem of MOUT, the issue needs to be examined from the operational level. At the strategic level, economic sanctions are used to degrade enemy combat power before the use of military action against a country. Therefore, on the operational level, the siege should be used to soften the enemy willpower before committing to a costly MOUT fight.

## MOUT HISTORY

World War II proved that American forces could win in a city battle, but only after the application of massive firepower, which reduced the cities to rubble and caused significant collateral damage to the civilian populace.<sup>ix</sup> This lesson was re-learned at the battle of Hue in 1968, when the city was reduced to rubble in-order to re-conquer it.<sup>x</sup>

For a long time the concept of fighting in a city had been an anathema to US military planning. Marine Corps doctrine notes that in all MOUT battles where the attacker won, the defender was totally isolated.<sup>xi</sup> The siege has been used since the biblical battle of Jericho; it is an old tactic, but one that has been used effectively throughout the ages to wear down an enemy barricaded inside a city before an assault or to force an enemy to surrender. The siege relates to USMC warfighting philosophy, which notes that warfare is about forcing ones will upon the enemy. The siege is a tactic that bends the enemy to ones will and forces the enemy to surrender without fighting.

The only people who determine when the fighting is over are those who eventually give up. The 'defeated' choose when to stop resisting in modern war; the victors cannot simply claim an end to fighting. Therefore, the enemy must be compelled to surrender by being given a choice. The siege allows the possibility of victory through offers of surrender.

#### **ELEMENTS OF A SIEGE**

A siege is defined as the surrounding of a town or fortified place in an effort to seize it.<sup>xii</sup> In ancient days a Siege had the same elements as it does today: forces first isolate the city by sweeping all areas surrounding and blocking all access routes; establish a base of operations; construct two lines of concentric fortifications, the first

to protect the besiegers from sorties from the city and the second line to protect them from relief forces.<sup>xiii</sup> Firepower and offers to surrender could then be used to force capitulation of the defenders. When executed effectively the siege can accomplish several things: degrade enemy combat power; force enemy surrender; and through information warfare maintain favorable public/world opinion by not destroying the city. History provides examples where sieges were used by the attacker to do these things.

### **MILITARY SIEGES**

The Romans used the aforementioned two lines of fortifications in many of their sieges. In the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD and of Masada in 73 AD the Romans faced a force protection threat from religious zealots<sup>xiv</sup> just as the US does today in Iraq. In both cases, the siege lines enabled the Romans to isolate the city unhindered from the rear while starvation and siege catapults degraded enemy combat power; eventual Roman assault did the rest.

In the siege of Paris in 1870-71, the Prussians wanted their territorial demands met and after defeating the French army in the field laid siege to Paris for five months. Starvation eventually forced the French to surrender and accept the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Frankfurt that ceded the Alsace-Lorraine to Germany.<sup>xv</sup> Thus, the Prussians forced their will upon the French without massive casualties to Prussian troops.

The siege that highlights the modern day problems of fighting against asymmetric non-state groups, much like the situation in Iraq, is the siege of Beirut in 1982 by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). The operational goal of the mission was the removal of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from its bases in Southern Lebanon. During the siege of Beirut, limited assaults were executed. Although, ground combat was used, it was used sparingly and aimed only at decisive points. These missions were also timed carefully to impact on the political negotiations. IDF combined arms kept the PLO constantly on edge as well. Naval bombardment, air strikes, and around the clock precision artillery hits ensured the PLO felt isolated and hopeless. A psyops campaign, which included leaflet drops and loudspeaker broadcasts, was employed to wear down the PLO's will to fight. The PLO evacuated Beirut on 22 August; thus victory was achieved without a bloody assault.<sup>xvi</sup>

However, the one area in which the IDF failed was in the form of information operations (IO). The IDF faced massive protest from the international community over civilian casualties. This protest was due to the PLO's carefully orchestrated control of the media in manipulating international sentiment. Reports of civilian casualties, damage and number of refugees were all inflated by PLO sources. Actual casualties of civilians were likely half of what the media reported, but the IDF did not effectively communicate accurate numbers to the media. The failure of



the IDF to present a positive account of operations to balance the PLO's efforts caused the international community to put tremendous pressure on them to break off the siege.<sup>xvii</sup> The crucial lesson learned is that an effective IO campaign is necessary to a successful siege operation in modern warfare.

### CONSIDERATIONS

Historically, if the enemy could not be defeated in open combat an army was forced to besiege his fortresses, therefore a siege implies failure to an attacker. Other problems include: increased manpower demands; potential humanitarian issues and a battlefield situation that may also require a quick reduction of a city. All effective sieges require complete isolation. For example, some estimates noted for the eight-mile perimeter around Hue would have taken sixteen infantry battalions to isolate the city.<sup>xviii</sup> Even though the siege is high in manpower requirements, history has shown that fortune favors mass rather than economy of force.

In regards to the potential humanitarian disaster, as the Israelis learned at Beirut, having 'free passage' for civilians means the US must provide basic necessities for the displaced population. If world opinion is to be ameliorated, then the suffering of the displaced population must be minimized for a successful modern day siege. While US forces have an obligation to limit collateral damage,

they also have an obligation to not slaughter men needlessly in a costly MOUT bloodbath. Instead, it is better to bend the enemy's will with offers of surrender.

### CONCLUSION

The US military should lay siege to cities before having to fight in them. Since a city battle dramatically increases the defender's strengths while negating the US advantage in firepower, the safest and most effective means to victory is the employment of a siege. By besieging instead of attacking, the enemy is not given the opportunity to draw US forces into a bloody street fight. Instead, the enemy must come out of his prepared defenses into the open to do battle or face erosion of combat power. A siege gives US forces an information warfare victory as well. By offering the defender terms to capitulate, an IO victory can be gained, since the world places the blame on the defenders who prolong the suffering, not on the besiegers. With the siege, operational flexibility is still retained as isolation, assault, and more offers of surrender all remain options to the attacker. Even if Marines are eventually compelled to attack, they will not have to do so until the enemy's capabilities of supplies and combat power have been significantly degraded. The duty of commanders is to attain mission accomplishment while judiciously using the lives of their Marines; the siege will set the conditions for that to take place in future urban conflicts.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Paul K Davis, Besieged: 100 Great Sieges From Jericho to Sarajevo. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 349-352.
- <sup>ii</sup> Ariel Sharon and David Chonaff. Warrior. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 475-479.
- <sup>iii</sup> Marine Corps Warfighting Publication. 3-35.3 Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain. (Washington DC: Department of the Navy, 1998), 1-1.
- <sup>iv</sup> Michael Ware, "Into the Hot Zone." Time, 22 November 2004, 33.
- <sup>v</sup> Based upon Urban Warrior results. Author conversation with Mr. William Lee Simpson, Wargaming Officer, Wargaming Division of the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab. 6 Jan 2005.
- <sup>vi</sup> Marine Corps Warfighting Lab Urban Warrior home page <http://www.defenselink.mil/specials/urbanwarrior/>
- <sup>vii</sup> Marine Corps Warfighting Lab X File 3-35.31 (revised) Urban Attacks. (Quantico: MCWL, 2003), 1.
- <sup>viii</sup> Marine Corps Warfighting Publication. 3-35.3, 1-16.
- <sup>ix</sup> John Antal and Bradley Gericke, City Fights: Selected Histories of Urban Combat From World War II to Vietnam. (New York: Presidio, 2003), 400.
- <sup>x</sup> Antal and Gericke, 357.
- <sup>xi</sup> Marine Corps Warfighting Publication. 3-35.3, 1-17.
- <sup>xii</sup> Davis, preface.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Vezio Melegari, The Great Military Sieges. (New York: Crowell Co, 1972), 154.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Davis, 39-40.
- <sup>xv</sup> Melegari, 218-222
- <sup>xvi</sup> Joint Publication 3-06 Doctrine for Joint Urban Operations. Appendix A <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/army/fm/3-06/appa.htm> 23 November 2005
- <sup>xvii</sup> JP 3-06, Appendix A.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Antal, 362

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