

URBAN FIGHTING

Concrete Hell: Urban Warfare from Stalingrad to Iraq

By Louis A. DiMarco

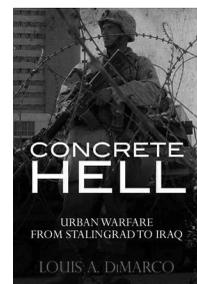
Reviewed by Gregory Fontenot, Colonel (USA Retired), Lansing, Kansas

In *Concrete Hell*, Louis A. DiMarco surveys historical trends in urban combat since World War II. Lieutenant Colonel DiMarco brings to his task both professional and personal interests. An experienced soldier and historian, DiMarco has focused his recent professional life on the problem of urban combat as a doctrine writer and teacher at the Army Command and General Staff College. DiMarco seeks to make three contributions related to understanding the urban battle space, providing insights into the nature of urban combat and its evolution—drawing from tactical, operational, and strategic considerations he believes will remain relevant. Regarding the last item, he explores the transition of urban combat from “simplistic conventional” fights in Stalingrad and Aachen to a “complex hybrid mixture” found in Chechnya and Iraq, concluding these “hybrid” fights in Chechnya and Iraq foretell the future.

Generally, DiMarco makes his case effectively. He begins by noting that at the turn of the century the Army was “particularly wary” of urban combat. DiMarco is absolutely right. The Army and, for that matter, US armed forces sought to avoid fighting in cities. This tendency may have come, in part, from focusing on defending cities in Europe. The Army in Europe, in particular, gave considerable thought to how to fight in towns and cities in the context of defense but far less thought on offensive urban combat. At the end of the Cold War, few soldiers imagined the United States would find itself in any kind of urban combat. Moreover, there were a great many “defense experts” who claimed that various revolutions in military affairs precluded ground combat let alone urban ground combat. Some believed that the nature of warfare itself had changed and that “contactless” battle would result.

But DiMarco’s argument, at least where the US Army is concerned, would have benefited from reviewing what the Army did do. Shortly after Operation Desert Storm, General Fred Franks (commanding the Training and Doctrine Command) confronted the idea that urban combat would be among the missions the post-Cold War Army might have to undertake. He did not have the money to develop large urban combat training centers and instead focused on developing a single “world class” venue at Fort Polk. However, Fort Polk’s urban combat venue was useful at the tactical level only.

The absence of large venues did not prevent the Army thinking and writing about urban combat. DiMarco played an important role in this effort providing a chapter in one of several books on urban combat published by the Army. These included Roger Spillers’ *Sharp Corners* in 2001 and William G. Robertson and Lawrence Yeats, *Block By Block* in 2003. These major studies were accompanied by lively arguments in journals as well. In the fall of 2002, the Army’s angst over urban combat came to a head as the possibility of war with Iraq loomed. Accordingly, the Army organized Operations Group F within the Battle Command



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Training Program to study and teach the principles of urban combat to all deploying divisions including the 1st Marine Division. Although DiMarco did not personally play a role in this effort, he was part of the team at Fort Leavenworth that developed the means to educate units. Simultaneously, the Army sought to learn from the Israeli experience that DiMarco describes in his chapter on Israeli Operations on the West Bank in 1992.

Despite this observation DiMarco, for the most part, delivers on his desired contributions. At the strategic level the central insight he offers is the role policy and politics play in decisions that led to urban combat. In several examples that DiMarco chose, politics proved central not only on the decision to fight in cities but also on how the attacker chose to fight. His assertion is absolutely right and demonstrable. For example, the operations of 1st Brigade 1st Armored Division in Ramadi in 2007 were driven by political considerations first. The Ready First Combat Team, as that brigade was styled, used classic conventional tactics to take the city while engaging local leaders simultaneously in an effort to separate them from the insurgents. The Ready First also sought to avoid destroying the city while saving it. DiMarco argues this operation demonstrated a transition from “simplistic conventional” fights in World War II to a “complex hybrid mixture of conventional and insurgent combat.”

This assessment is not convincing. In the chapter devoted to the US operations to seize Aachen in 1944, it is clear the US commanders did not care whether they reduced Aachen to rubble. Yet DiMarco points out that, although the Army did reduce much of the city to rubble, US commanders provided for what they considered a hostile population. They did so to separate them from the German Army defenders but also to avoid killing civilians unnecessarily. He further notes that US government troops arrived on the heels of the infantry. In other words, at least some of the characteristics of complex “hybrid” operations existed even in 1944. What seems more likely than the fundamental change DiMarco posits is that the means used depend on the ends the attacker intends to achieve. If in October 1944, the US Army had wanted to encourage the inhabitants of Aachen to switch sides or at least be neutral, then their approach would have been different. DiMarco and others miss this essential point when they conclude the means have changed for any other reason than the ends have changed. Finally, describing Stalingrad and Aachen as “simplistic” is simply not accurate. Fighting to seize a vigorously defended city may well be merely complicated rather than complex but it is not simplistic.

DiMarco’s conclusions on the operational and tactical levels are all on the mark. His consideration of Stalingrad not only reviews the thoroughly bad strategic choices that Hitler made but also the poor operational decisions by German commanders. The risks they chose to take with respect to flank security are only one of several bad choices. Although DiMarco discovered little that is new, his study reaffirms some lessons which armies have had trouble learning. For example, one lesson learned again and again is that tanks are useful in cities. This idea is one that just will not stick. German tactical guidance in 1938 deemed tanks too heavy, too awkward, and too vulnerable to flank attacks from side streets to operate in cities. Yet in each case DiMarco studies, with the exception of Algiers, tanks proved essential. Generally, this observation

is a subset of the more important notion of combined arms. Urban combat absolutely demands a combined arms approach.

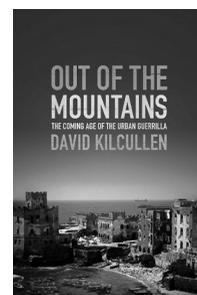
Colonel DiMarco's book is a useful survey of combat operations in cities. He deserves to be read and, more importantly, the conclusions he reaches considered carefully and critically as fighting in "concrete hell" is likely to remain a feature of operations in the future. Doing so will help realize DiMarco's goal of the US armed forces taking on board the often repeated lessons of fighting in cities.

Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla By David Kilcullen

Reviewed by José de Arimatéia da Cruz, Visiting Research Professor at the U. S. War College, and Professor of International Relations and Comparative Politics at Armstrong Atlantic State University, Savannah, GA

David Kilcullen, author of *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* and *Counterinsurgency*, delivers another essential work in *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*. Kilcullen is no stranger to the study of insurgency and counterinsurgency. He is a former soldier and diplomat. He also served as a senior advisor to both General David H. Petraeus and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *Out of the Mountains* offers a new way of looking at the nature of future conflicts given four powerful tectonic forces impacting the world of the twenty-first century: population, urbanization, coastal settlement, and connectedness. Kilcullen's thesis is that the cities of the future—mostly coastal, highly urbanized, and heavily populated—will be the central focus of tomorrow's conflicts, which will be heavily impacted by the four megatrends of population growth, urbanization, littoralization, and connectedness. He asserts that "more people than ever before in history will be competing for scarcer and scarcer resources in poorly governed areas that lack adequate infrastructure, and these areas will be more and more closely connected to the global system, so that local conflict will have far wider affects" (50).

Within this heavily populated, highly urbanized, littoralized, and connected world, "adversaries are likely to be nonstate armed groups (whether criminal or military) or to adopt asymmetric methods, and even the most conventional hypothetical war scenarios turn out, when closely examined, to involve very significant irregular aspects" (107). Kilcullen defines nonstate armed groups as "any group that includes armed individuals who apply violence but who aren't members of the regular forces of a nation-state" (126). Under this broader definition of nonstate armed groups, Kilcullen includes "urban street gangs, communitarian or sectarian militias, insurgents, bandits, pirates, armed smugglers or drug traffickers, violent organized criminal organizations, warlord armies, and certain paramilitary forces. The term encompasses both combatants and individuals who don't personally carry arms or use violence but who belong to groups that do" (126). Those nontraditional nonstate armed groups not only undermine the authority and legitimacy of the state but also corrupt the social fabric of society. The "new warrior class" or "conflict entrepreneurs" are those individuals in society part of the "bottom billion" who have lost all hopes of a better future, social



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