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C O N T E N T S

INTRODUCTION.page 1
EXPLANATION.pages 1-8
SUMMARY.pages 8-9
BIBLIOGRAPHYpage 10
CHART I.page 11
CHART IIpage 12
CHART III.page 13

TANKS IN SUPPORT OF INFANTRY IN ISLAND WARFARE

The employment of armor in the Pacific differed greatly from its mass employment in Europe. In the Pacific, there were no large land masses involved, and the campaigns were a series of amphibious operations against small islands. As this island warfare had certain special characteristics, special methods were of necessity employed and special factors and problems had to be considered, especially in the employment of tanks. In this discussion of the operations of the 77th Infantry Division in phase I of Operation Iceberg, I shall point out some of the special factors involved in the employment of supporting tanks in island warfare.

Operation Iceberg was the invasion of the OKINAWA GUNTO, a group of islands about 300 miles south of the Japanese mainland (see chart 1). The purpose of their capture was to establish bases for operations against JAPAN, as well as to cut the Japanese lines of communication through the CHINA SEA. The first step in the plan was the seizure of the islands of the KERAMA RETTO and KEISE SHIMA, in order to provide security for the naval anchorage and to provide a seaplane base and artillery positions to support the main assault on the west coast of OKINAWA. (2)

The 77th Infantry Division was assigned the mission of securing these islands between L-6 and L-1 (26-31 March, 1945), inclusive. On completion of this task, the division, less one BLT to garrison KERAMA RETTO, was to revert to Army Floating Reserve, prepared to capture and defend IE SHIMA on order. (1)

When the warning order was received early in January, 1945, the division was still actively engaged with the enemy on the west coast of LEYTE, and was not relieved until 5 February. A planning group, consisting of the Assistant Division Commander, the G-2, G-3, and TQM, was sent immediately to Headquarters, Tenth Army in HAWAII. There, in coordination with the army staff and the Navy, tentative plans were drafted and all available information was obtained on the enemy and the objective. Attachments and shipping allocations also were received at that time, and the group rejoined the division in the staging area on LEYTE on 5 February, with all data necessary for the detailed planning. (2)

(1) Operation Plan Iceberg, CINCPAC.

(2) Operation Report, Iceberg, phase I, 77th Inf Div, 26 Mar-27 Apr, 45. (~~Local file Ul-26.~~)

A landing force must have all the necessary supporting units with it, including certain special units to perform missions peculiar to amphibious operations. The 77th Division had the usual small detachments, such as intelligence and CIC teams, many of which are now organic in the infantry division. The major attachments included the 706th Medium Tank Battalion, 708th Amphibious Tank Battalion, and the 715th and 773d Amphibious Tractor Battalions to provide armored support and to land the assault infantry battalions. Organic fire support was augmented by the attachment of Company A, 88th Chemical Mortar Battalion, the 93d AAA Gun Battalion, and the 7th AAA AW Battalion with the 2d platoon, Battery A, 295th AAA S/L Battalion attached. The 420th FA Group, composed of the 522d and 531st FA Battalions (155 G), was also attached, but was to revert to the control of XXIV Corps on landing, and was not employed by the division. The 292d JASCO and the 1118th Engineer Group, consisting of the 132d, 233d, and 242d Engineer Combat Battalions, were also attached for shore party operations and communications on the beaches. A unique organization, the special Marine Amphibious Reconnaissance Battalion, FMFPAC, completed the tactical attachments. Other attachments included the 477th and 828th Amphibious Truck Companies, to be used to transport the light artillery and supplies ashore at the target. Additional medical support was provided by the 36th Field Hospital, the 68th and 95th portable Surgical Hospitals, and a detachment of the 75th Station Hospital. (*)

The division was organized into RCTs. Each RCT included the usual attachments of organic divisional units, one light artillery battalion, an engineer company, a medical company, and detachments from the ordnance and signal companies and the reconnaissance troop. From the attached units, each RCT received one medium tank company, two DUKW sections with the artillery battalion, an engineer battalion, a JASCO detachment, an AAA AW battery, and a chemical mortar platoon. In addition, the two assault RCTs received half of the amphibious tank battalion, one of the two amphibious tractor battalions, half of the remaining medical company, and a portable surgical hospital. The reserve RCT was augmented by a field hospital platoon. (*)

(*) Operation Report, Iceberg, phase I, 77th Inf Div,
26 Mar-27 Apr, 45. (~~Local file 01-26.~~)

One of the major problems in amphibious planning is that of loading the combat elements and supporting services in the allotted shipping for the movement to the target area. Because of the weight of vehicles and equipment, special consideration must be given to the loading of armored units, so that they can be landed and employed early in the operation. Amphibious tanks and tractors were loaded in LSTs, from which they could debark directly into the water, and the assault infantry was mounted in the same LSTs with the tractors. The Medium tank battalion was loaded on two LSTs and three LSMs. (*)

The location and condition of the beaches on the target is another factor which must be given careful consideration in the planning, because they can seriously affect the early employment of units, especially tank units, and the resupply of units ashore. As information on the beaches in KERAMA RETTO and on IESHIMA was very limited and of doubtful reliability, several alternate plans had to be prepared. (*)

In addition to the planning, rehabilitation, resupply, and replacement of personnel and equipment losses had to be accomplished during this period, as well as training. The training was limited mainly to the replacements, as occupation and other duties made organized unit training virtually impossible. The tank units concentrated on maintenance and repair of vehicles and the training of new tank crews during this time. (*)

The division was embarked by 9 March, and practice landings were held on LEYTE for all assault units, simulating the KERAMA RETTO and IESHIMA landings. On 22 March, the convoy departed for the target area. The time enroute was utilized to the fullest extent to provide additional training. All personnel were thoroughly oriented in their assigned tasks, and all available information of the enemy and of the terrain and beaches of the objectives was disseminated to the troops. Maintenance and care of equipment received special emphasis, particularly in tank units, since they assume added importance at sea, due to the effect of salt and moisture on materiel. Also, every effort was made, in spite of crowded conditions, to maintain the physical fitness of the men.

The task force arrived in the vicinity of KERAMA RETTO early on the morning of 26 March. After receiving reports of Navy Underwater Demolition Teams which had gone in to

(*) Operation Report, Iceberg, phase I, 77th Inf Div, 26 Mar-27 Apr, 45. (~~Local file 01-26.~~)

reconnoiter beaches and remove obstacles, exact locations for the landings were decided on and necessary orders were issued. At 0800, following a heavy naval gunfire preparation, supported by air attacks on the objectives, four battalion landing teams made simultaneous landings on ZAMAMI, AKA, GERUMA, and HOKAJI (see chart 2). Amphibious tractors were used to land the assault battalions, preceded by amphibious tanks which provided fire support during the approach to the beaches. After beaching, both tanks and tractors were utilized in beach defense against counter attacks, and for waterborne patrols along the shores.

Because of the small size of the islands, the beach conditions, and the light resistance expected, the medium tanks were not landed in KERAMA RETTO. Amphibious tanks, however, performed the missions of land tanks in some cases and accompanied the infantry inland, clearing caves, buildings, and dug in positions in support of the infantry. On AKA SHIMA, they were also used to fire an artillery preparation for an assault on a strong enemy position. (*)

GERUMA and HOKAJI were quickly secured. Two light artillery battalions were then landed on GERUMA to support the other landings, and one of the reserve battalions was committed on YAKABI. As the beaches were unsuitable for landing LCVPs, it was necessary to transfer the battalion from its LCVPs to the amphibious tractors of one of the assault battalions for the landing. On the following day, KUBA and AMURO were occupied without resistance, and the BLTs on GERUMA and HOKAJI made a shore to shore assault on TOKASHIKI JIMA, supported by the artillery on GERUMA. Fighting continued on the other islands, and the garrison force and base installations began landing on ZAMAMI. (*)

By 29 March, all the islands were secured and all units reembarked, except for the garrison force and one battalion which was still mopping up on TOKASHIKI. Both Army and Navy base installations were ashore on ZAMAMI, and by the next day were in operation. KEISE SHIMA was occupied on 31 March without opposition, and the guns of the 420th FA Group were emplaced and registered, ready to support the main landing 1 April on OKIMAWA JIMA. The division then moved out to sea in army reserve to await the order to attack IE SHIMA. (*)

(*) Operation Report, Iceberg, phase I, 77th Inf Div, 26 Mar-27 Apr, 45. (~~local file 01-26.~~)

A few days later the order was received. Since tentative plans had already been made back on LEYTE for this landing, it was only necessary to complete final details. A study of aerial photographs and reports of UDTs showed that the best beaches were those to the south and southeast of the town of IE (see chart 3). They were dominated, however, by strong enemy positions in IE and on the slopes of IEGUSUGU YAMA. Because of the reefs, the beaches to the west could only be used by small landing craft for about an hour and a half before and after high tide, and LSTs and LSMs could not reach the beaches at all. In spite of this fact, it was decided to make the assault landing over the less desirable, but lightly defended western beaches, and to transfer operations to the better beaches after they had been secured from the rear. (*)

The Operations Order was issued on 12 April. RCT 305, less the battalion garrisoning KERAMA RETTO, was to land at 0800 on 16 April over Beaches RED 1 and RED 2, advance east in its zone, secure Beach RED 4, capture IE, and assist RCT 306 in the reduction of IEGUSUGU YAMA. RCT 306 was to land at the same time over GREEN Beach, advance east in its zone, secure the air field, and reduce IEGU* SUGU YAMA, assisted by RCT 305. RCT 307, in division reserve, was to be prepared to land with two battalions on beaches to be designated and secure the east end of the island. One battalion of RCT 307 had to be held available for employment by Tenth Army as a diversionary force on OKINAWA. Division Artillery, less one light battalion with RCT 306, was to land on 15 April on MINNA SHIMA and support the landings on IE from there. MINNA SHIMA is a small island, 6500 yards south of IE, which was to be secured by the MARINE Amphibious Reconnaissance Battalion on the night of 12-13 April. (*)

The landing was made according to plan. All four assault battalions were ashore by 0835, and the reserve battalion of RCT 306 landed at 1100 as the advance continued eastward. Since the LSTs and LSMs carrying the medium tank battalion could not land on the assault beaches, amphibious tanks remained with the infantry to provide direct fire support. Initially, they were greatly hampered by extensive mine fields in rear of the beaches. All principal roads on the island, and other natural avenues of approach to the enemy positions, were also found

(*) Operation Report, Iceberg, phase I, 77th Inf Div, 26 Mar-27 Apr, 45. (~~Local file 01-26.~~)

to be heavily mined. 100 and 200 pound aerial bombs were frequently used as mines, and their removal greatly hampered mine clearing activities. (*)

By the end of the day, RCT 306, with three battalions abreast, had secured the air field and advanced a total of more than five thousand yards. RCT 305 made much slower progress. Resistance was much stronger in the south, and the advance of the supporting amphibious tanks and M-18s was hampered by the extensive mine fields, which were covered by heavy mortar and machine gun fire, making it difficult to clear lanes for the armor. Positions were consolidated for the night as shown on chart 3, the gap between the two RCTs being covered by a reinforced company of RCT 306. (*)

On the second day, RCT 306 was ordered to remain in position while RCT 305 resumed the attack in its zone. Continually stronger resistance was encountered by the 3d Battalion on the left. The fighting was characterized by a series of short advances by the infantry covered by the fire of the tanks, halts to clear paths through the mine fields to enable the armor to move forward, then a repetition of the process. The 1st Battalion, on the other hand, found the going easier, and by mid afternoon had advanced beyond Beach RED 4. RCT 305 was then halted to cover the landing of RCT 307, which was ordered to land and attack through the 1st Battalion, 305th, to seize GOVERNMENT HOUSE HILL, supported by the fire of RCT 305 from the west edge of IE. This attack was able to reach the southern edge of IE, despite heavy fire from the strong enemy positions, but they had difficulty getting the armor up to close supporting range because of the numerous mine fields, and the attack was again halted for the night and positions consolidated with the right flank resting on the beach. (*)

306

On the 18th, RCT/resumed its attack and began the envelopment of the main enemy position on IEGUSUGU YAMA. RCT305 made small gains against stiff resistance in the west of IE, fighting from house to house, with the armor in close support blasting machine gun positions in the buildings and rubble of the town. On the south, RCT 307, with the 1st Battalion, 305th attached, advanced slowly against GOVERNMENT HOUSE HILL in a similar manner. Positions at the end of the day showed little progress except in the case of RCT 306. (*)

(*) Operation Report, Iceberg, phase I, 77th Inf Div,
26 Mar-27 Apr, 45. (~~Local file UI-26.~~)

The medium tank battalion began landing on the 18th, and by the next day all elements were ashore and supporting the attack of RCTs 305 and 307, while RCT 306 again halted to permit the employment of all supporting artillery and naval gunfire in support of the attack on GOVERNMENT HOUSE HILL. Little progress was made, however, except by the 3d Battalion, 307th, which swung to the east to bypass the main position, and pushed north through AGARIEUE. The 1st Battalion, 305th, was then moved into the gap thus created and the attack again halted for the night.

On the 20th, all seven battalions launched a coordinated attack against the Jap stronghold. The flat trajectory guns of the medium tanks provided far more effective direct fire support to the infantry against caves and pill boxes, than had the howitzers of the amphibious tanks. This increased effectiveness began to make itself felt and at last the positions on GOVERNMENT HOUSE HILL were taken. The enemy resisted strongly, and after losing the hill launched two vigorous counter attacks in an effort to regain the position. These were not stopped until the attackers had been annihilated. In the meantime, RCT 306, making their main effort from the east with two battalions echeloned to the left, advanced about half way up the east slope of IEGUSUGU YAMA itself.

Numerous suicidal counter attacks were repulsed during the night, and the next day the final assault was begun by the 305th and 306th. The 3d Battalion, 307th, was pinched out by the advance of RCT 306, and was moved in to relieve the 2d Battalion, which, up to this time, had borne the heaviest fighting. RCT 305 was stopped to permit RCT 307 to resume the attack, and when their fire was masked by RCT 307, reverted to division reserve and assembled west of IE. RCTs 306 and 307 continued the assault. The rough terrain of the mountain and the numerous mines prevented the tanks from moving further up the mountain, but the steepness of the slopes made it possible for them to continue to support the attack with direct fire over the heads of the infantry. The last stage of the assault was accomplished by small groups of infantry, using mountain climbing tactics to reach the peak and attack caves from above with flame throwers and demolitions. (*)

(*) Operation Report, Iceberg, Phase I, 77th Inf Div, 26 Mar-27 Apr, 45. (~~Local file 01-26.~~)

This was the end of organized resistance on the island, but not the end of the tanks' usefulness. The island was infested with small groups of Japanese, who were holed up in caves and fanatically refused to surrender. To mop them up, teams of infantry and tanks were formed, using much the same tactics as employed in the attack. The tanks would fire into the caves at short range, sealing the smaller ones and neutralizing the larger ones to permit the infantry to approach and burn them out with flame throwers or seal them with explosives.

During this operation, tanks were employed in units varying in size from platoons to individual tanks. Due to the close quarters and the consequent danger of firing into adjacent units, tanks fired only on targets designated by the infantry. Ranging, or adjustment was usually done with the coaxial machine gun, since the ranges were extremely short, with a resultant saving in ammunition. In several cases tanks were used for supply and evacuation over fire-swept areas when other means were impossible. During the six days the tanks were engaged, five were destroyed by mines, hand placed satchel charges, or antitank guns. The 60 tanks fired a total of over 4000 rounds of 75mm, and almost 400,000 rounds of .30 caliber ammunition. (*)

Although they are not intended to be employed beyond the beaches, the amphibious tanks proved to be invaluable during the two days they performed the missions of land tanks before the mediums could be landed. Four of the amphibians were destroyed and two damaged, and the battalion fired over 1600 rounds of 75mm, 900 rounds of 37 mm, and about 180,000 rounds each of .50 and .30 caliber. (*)

There are many unfavorable factors involved in the employment of tanks in island warfare. Getting them to the battle field is a problem in itself. LSTs and LSMs are suitable for transporting all present types of tanks, and where reef conditions permit their beaching, they can unload tanks quickly, ready for combat. Frequently, however, they cannot beach until channels have been made for them through the reefs, and as a result the tanks are not available in the early stages of the assault. One solution is to load some tanks in LCTs which can be carried to the target in the well deck of an LSD, and move directly to the beach in water over four feet in depth. LCMs

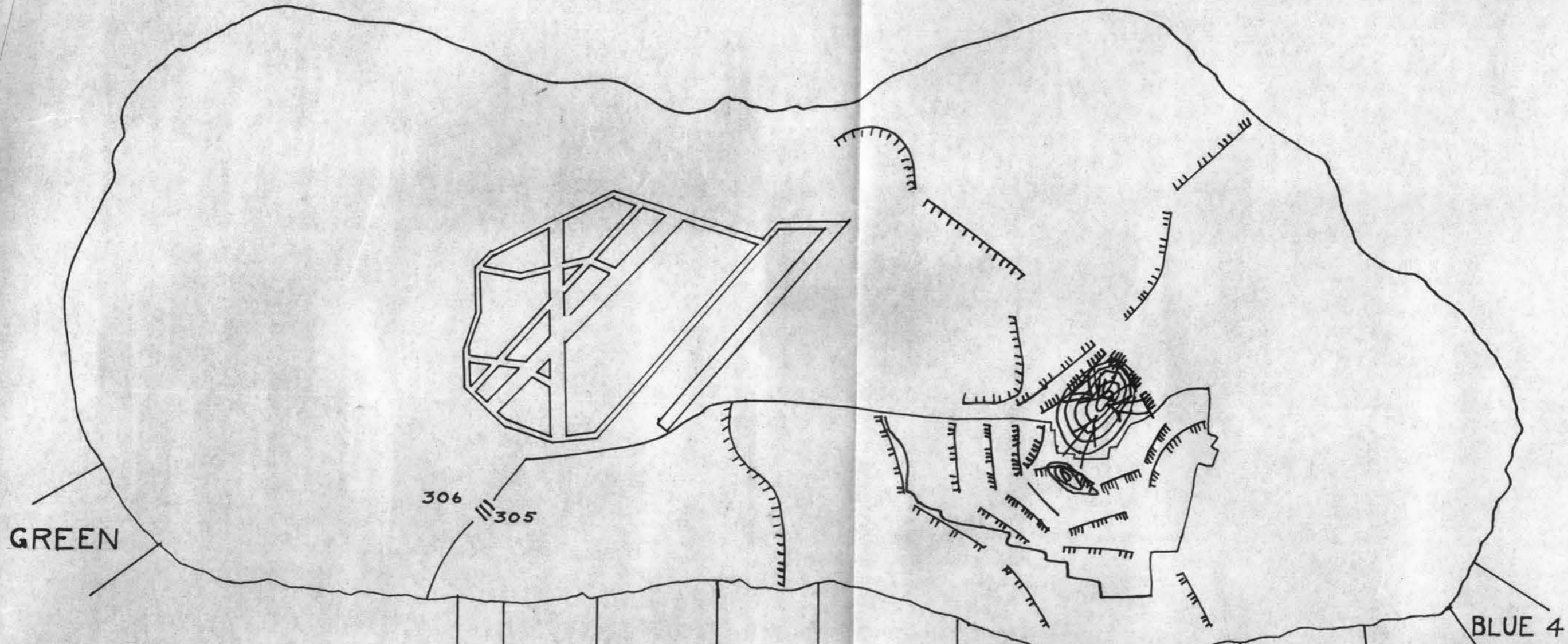
(*) Operation Report, Iceberg, Phase I, 77th Inf Div,
26 Mar-27 Apr, 45. (~~Local file 01-26.~~)

can be used to land M4s from any ship having a suitable boom to lift them, but they cannot carry the M-26.

Once ashore, the tanks will encounter extremely rugged terrain on most islands, and never will it be favorable for tanks. Roads are always poor and narrow, and the towns are effective barriers. Heavy vegetation is the rule, making ambush easy, and restricting mobility. Mine fields and antitank defenses can, of course, be counted on to augment these natural difficulties, so that just about everything about island warfare is against the employment of tanks. Despite this fact, they were invaluable, and although their full capabilities can not be utilized under such conditions, they are still an important part of the combined arms team and their capabilities should be exploited to the greatest possible extent in order to insure success.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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GREEN

306 305

BLUE 4

BLUE 3

POSITIONS

- 16TH
- 17TH
- 18TH
- 19TH
- 20TH

RED 1

RED 2

RED 3

RED 4

BLUE 1

BLUE 2

IE SHIMA

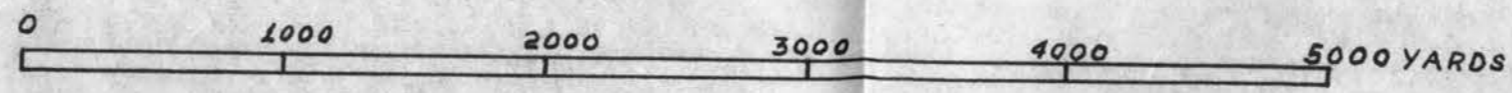


CHART 3

OKINAWA

IE SHIMA

KERAMA

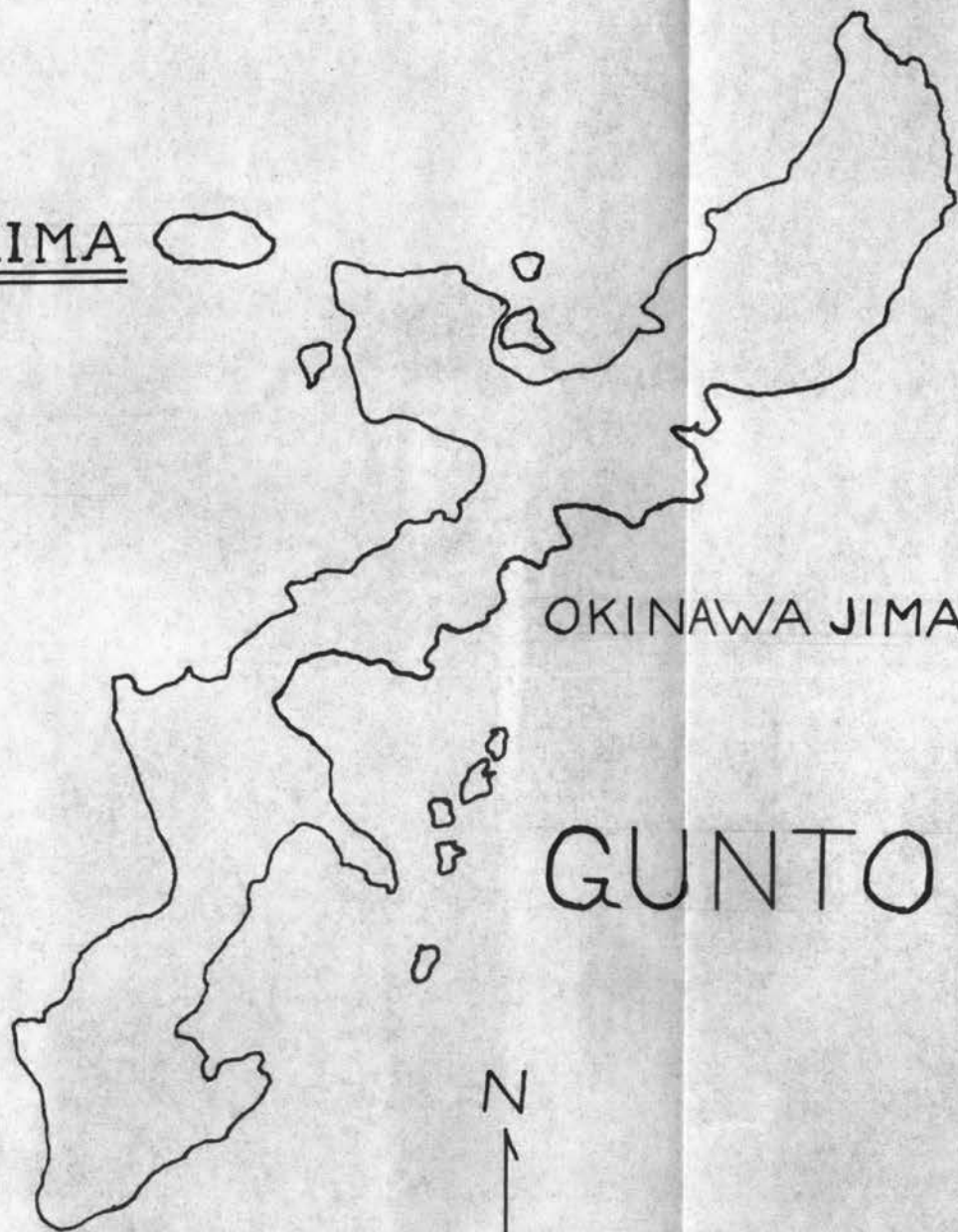


RETTO

KEISE
SHIMA

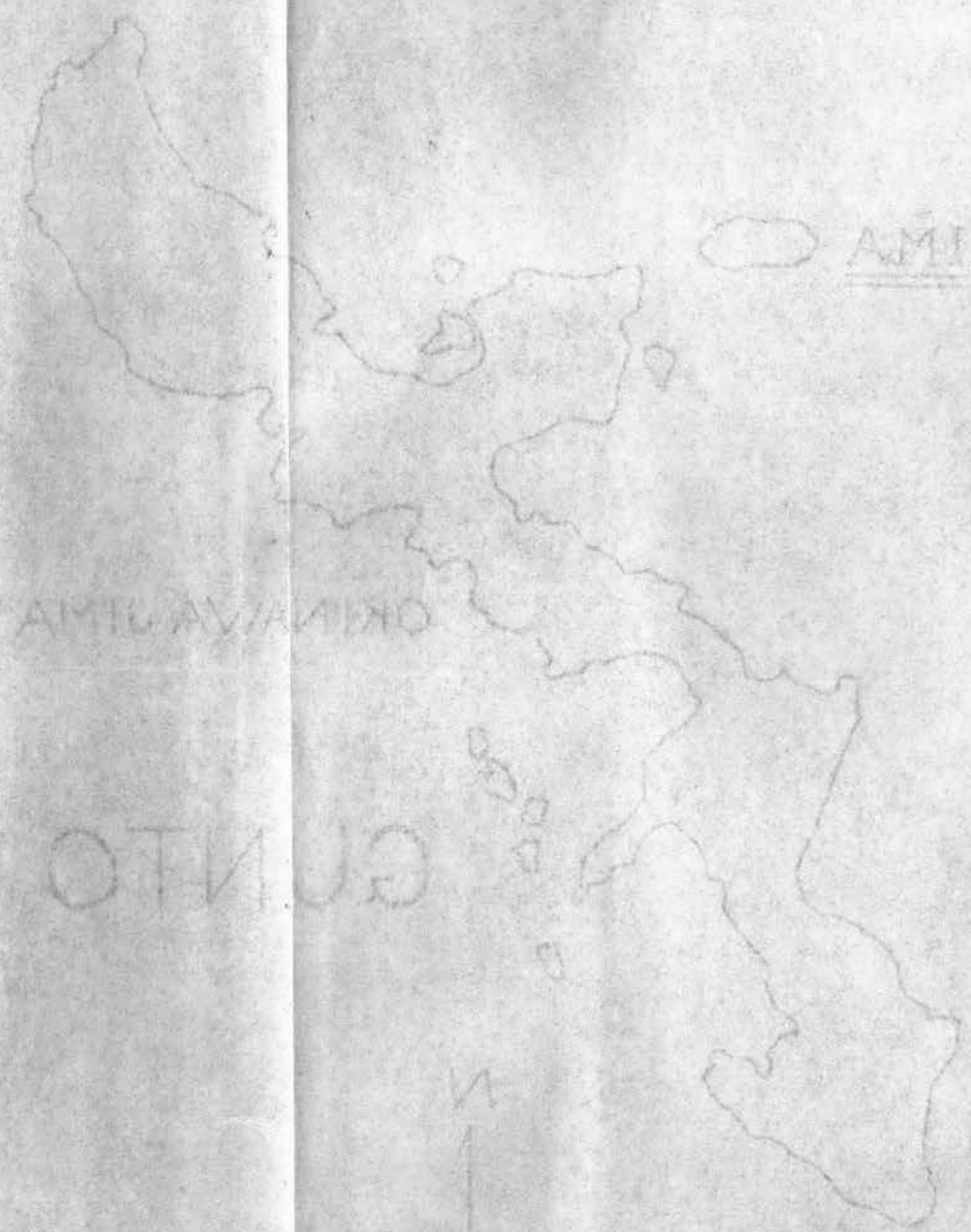
OKINAWA JIMA

GUNTO



10 5 0 10 20 MILES

CHART 1



LE SHIMA

OKINAWA

OKINAWA JIMA

GUANTO

KEISE
SHIMA



KEIRANA

REITO

10 5 0 5 10

CHART 1

CHART 1



KERAMA RETTO

0 1 2 3 4 5,000 YARDS

0 1 2 3 4 5 MILES



CHART 2

KEISE
SHIMA



CHART 5

SHIMA
KERRE

MAE

TOYASHIKI

KERAMA RETTO



CHART 2

CHART 2

