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HISTORICAL TACTICAL STUDY  
THE CONQUEST OF THE BALTIC ISLANDS  
October 1917

A Landing on hostile shores.

Part I- Introduction, plans and  
operations to include the landing  
October 12, 1917.

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FOOTNOTE ABBREVIATIONS USED

- GVT "The Army and Navy during the Conquest of the Baltic Islands in October, 1917" by von Tschischwitz.
- FMG "The Invasion and Capture of the Baltic Islands" by Lieutenant Colonel Fred M. Green, Coast Artillery Corps, and Captain C.T. Lanham, Infantry, in "The Infantry Journal", July-August 1936, September-October 1936.
- JEE "A German Landing" by Brigadier-General J.E. Edmonds, C.B., C.M.G., R.E. (retired) in "The Army Quarterly", Volume 10, April-July, 1925.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Von Tschischwitz

"The Army and Navy during the Conquest of the Baltic Islands in October 1917." R. Eisenschmidt, Berlin, 1931. Translation by Colonel H. H. Hassfeld, U. S. A.

Analytical Study, based on actual experiences of the author, a Lieutenant General, German Army, retired, who was then Chief of Staff of the Expeditionary forces. A very accurate and complete account of the entire expedition. The analysis and discussions seem sound. However, it may be slightly partial to the German forces, as there is no Russian account of the same operation. Probably the best authoritative source on the subject.

Green, Fred M.  
and  
Lanham, C. T.

"The Invasion and Capture of the Baltic Islands." The Infantry Journal, July - August, 1936 and September - October, 1936.

An article written by two U.S. Army Officers in story form, based on Von Tschischwitz's book. Very interesting reading, but short and few details.

Edmonds, J. E.

"A German Landing." The Army Quarterly, Volume X, April - July 1925. William Clowes & Sons, Ltd., London.

A very brief and concise account of the operation with few details. Little credit is given to the Germans by this article. The author, a Brigadier-General, retired, in the British Army does not write from actual experience, but uses as his authorities a number of German books.

## THE CONQUEST OF THE BALTIC ISLANDS

1. INTRODUCTION.--(Map No. 1) The only successful Amphibious operation in the World War was the capture of the Baltic Islands. This monograph describes briefly this operation to include the actual landing.

In August 1917 the Germans had taken up the offensive on the Eastern front and by September 7, the Germans had driven the Russians back until the left flank of the German Eighth Army rested on the Gulf of Riga.

For two years Russia's Baltic Fleet had based safely in the Gulf of Riga, sallying forth to prey on Germany's indispensable commerce with the Scandinavian Countries, and likewise threatening the left flank of her Eastern Armies. Now with this left flank resting on the Gulf of Riga, it was completely exposed from the sea. The Russian Baltic Fleet had to be destroyed or driven from the Gulf. (1) Nothing would have pleased the German Navy more, for Ludendorff states that the inactivity of the Fleets confined to their North Sea ports since the battle of Jutland, had sapped discipline and favoured the spread of Revolutionary ideas. (2) But in order to destroy the Russian Fleet it was necessary to have ingress to the Gulf of Riga. There are only two entrances for first line ships into the Gulf, both of which were guarded by well armed Coastal Batteries on the Baltic Islands and barred by Mine Fields. The Baltic Islands had to be conquered to make the Gulf of Riga a German Sea. (3)

On September 19, the Kaiser issued a brief order for the capture of the Baltic Islands. Lieutenant General von Hutier, commander of the Eighth Army was given supreme command of or-

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(1) FMG p 244 (2) JEE p 270 (3) GVT p 4

ganizing the joint Army and Navy expedition. No mistake was made here, as was made by the English at Gallipoli, in assuming a cooperation between the Army and Navy, but on Hutier alone rested the task of organizing and coordinating the combined forces. (4)

2. THE ISLANDS AND THEIR SURROUNDING WATERS.--(Map No.1-2)

The Baltic Islands consists of Oesel, Moon, Dago, and Worms. The largest and most important of these is Oesel Island. This Island, comprising some 1500 square miles, has an approximate population of 60,000 inhabitants.

Oesel in general, is low, flat, and marshy. The coast is very regular with numerous small bays, whose beaches are of sand intermixed with clay, gravel and boulders. Along its eastern coast runs a ridge which reaches, in places, a height of 30 feet. Other parts of the shore are very flat with abrupt declines in only a few places. The interior of the island is a large plain with no elevation over 55 feet. The streams are all small and easily forded. The top soil is very shallow and beneath is a stratum of limestone, which makes field fortification difficult to construct. The large number of boulders on the Island have enabled the inhabitants to construct stone walls around their houses and fields.

The villages are all very small with the exception of Arensburg, the Capital. Arensburg is a picturesque town of 5,000 inhabitants, with no harbor near the town. At Romassar, three kilometers from Arensburg, is a harbor with a mole, which vessels of small draft can use.

Communications of the Island were very limited. There being only five narrow highways, running from Arensburg to other parts of the Island, with no lateral roads cross connecting these. The Island had no railroad of any kind. The regular

line of communication with the mainland was the Arensburg-Orissar road, which crossed from Oesel to Moon on a stone dam, connecting the two Islands, then across Moon to the east coast. From here a steam-ferry plied across to the Island of Werder, which connects to the mainland by a bridge. (5)

3. INFORMATION OF THE ENEMY.-(Map No. 2) The Russians, too, realized the importance of the Baltic Islands, and had expected for some time an attempt on the part of the Germans to capture them. The Germans through air reconnaissance, their information service, patrols by submarines, and light surface crafts had a comprehensive picture of the strength, dispositions, fortifications, and armament of the garrisons. This information is given below.

The garrison of Oesel Island consisted roughly of the 107th Division, reenforced with field artillery. The 426th Infantry with attached artillery occupied the northern coast, with their main forces located in the vicinity of Tagga Bay. The 425th Infantry was located on Sworbe Peninsula. The 472d Infantry was held at division headquarters at Arensburg in reserve.

Coastal Batteries were located at dominating points around the Islands. A 12-inch battery, the largest on the Island, with two smaller batteries were located on Sworbe Peninsula. This 12-inch battery was capable of all-round fire, and the range of these guns was sufficient to reach the mainland; thereby denying entrance into Irben Strait of surface craft. Protecting the entrance of Tagga Bay, at Hundsort Point, was located a battery of 6-inch guns, and on the other side of the entrance, at Ninast Point, was a battery of 4.7-inch guns. Soela Sound was dominated by two batteries, one located on the southern tip of Dago Island and the other near Pamerrort. Likewise Moon Sound was closed by three batteries, two on the southern part of Moon Island, and another on Werder Point.

The Russian Naval forces in these waters consisted of four modern battleships at Helsingfors in the Gulf of Finland; and several old type battleships, cruisers, a flotilla of destroyers, submarines, and a large number of smaller craft located in Moon Sound. Eight British submarines were based at Hango. A suggestion of the German valuation of the efficiency and readiness of the Russian Fleet, may be deduced by the great danger factor they considered these British submarines to be.

Most of the important waters surrounding the Baltic Islands were mined. The Russians were very ingenious in constructing this type of weapon. There were three general types used by the Russians. A large mine having a charge of 440 pounds and anchored at a depth of 6 to 16 feet; a smaller mine with a 40 pound charge which was anchored at a depth of 2 to 5 feet. This latter type of mine played havoc with the German mine sweepers. The third type was one, with three charges attached at different depths to a single cable, for submarines. (6)

4. GERMAN FORCES.- The Battle of Flanders was being fought on the Western Front, so Germany could only spare one brigade of Cyclists from this front to von Hutier. He managed to raise two veteran divisions from his badly depleted Eighth Army near Riga. In all he had 23,000 officers and men, 5,000 animals, 14,000 vehicles, 54 field guns varying in calibre from 3 to 8 inches, 12 trench mortars.

The Naval complement assigned to his force consisted of: one battle cruiser, 10 modern battleships, 8 cruisers, 6 submarines, a swarm of destroyers, patrol boats, and mine sweepers. 21 transports were furnished, totaling some 150,000 tons. These would not transport the entire expeditionary force and its equipment in one trip.

75 planes were assigned, 68 of which were Naval planes with little experience in land warfare. However, these were sufficient to give the Germans control of the air. (7)

5. PLANS AND PREPARATIONS.- (Map No. 2) Libau, which had a splendid harbor and good docking facilities, was selected as the base of operations. Windau, being near Oesel, was chosen as an advance base for the air craft and mine sweepers.

von Hutier decided that any landing on the southern shore of Oesel would be out of the question. The reason for this decision was the disposition of the Russian forces in Oesel, and the vulnerability of the German Fleet, encumbered with transports, to the Russian coastal guns and naval forces.

On the northern shore of Oesel there were two possible landing sites, Tagga Bay and Pamerrort. Pamerrort was far from perfect; the beaches were small, and there was no protection for the fleet from the Baltic storms. Tagga Bay<sup>was</sup> known to be fortified and strongly garrisoned. However, it was selected as the landing site for the main landing. The reason being the beaches were of sufficient size to permit the landing of a large force; and the bay offered a deep, sheltered harbor large enough to offer safe anchorage for the entire naval component. (8)

Due to the limited coast line, and the small number of suitable landing beaches; the element of surprise, usually inherent in an amphibious force because of its mobility, was entirely lacking in this operation. Later we shall see how the Germans tried to obtain surprise by other methods.

On September 24, von Hutier issued a field order for the operation, but the plan later underwent drastic revision. The expedition was to start on 27 September, which meant headlong haste. On September 26 a storm blew up and the expedition had to be postponed. The sea was so rough, that very little mine sweeping could be done during this enforced delay.

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(8) FMG pp 245.

However, this postponement showed many errors in the plans and organization. The embarkation and loading tables, prepared by the Admiralty in Berlin, were calculated on the maximum tonnage of the transports. No proper sequence of loading was arranged, so the essential supplies could be unloaded first upon landing, and the tactical sequence of units had been disregarded. These errors were corrected on the spot.

Embarking and disembarking drills were conducted. A curious fact was that more emphasis was put on embarking than on landing; and this drill reached such efficiency, the entire force could be loaded in two days. All heavy material and one half the animals were loaded. Each day the animals aboard were brought ashore and replaced aboard by those on shore. Later this was found unnecessary; for the animals which had remained on board for twelve days, were able upon landing to make two marches of 40 kilometers each, without injury. During this period, lighters were designed and constructed for the landing of animals and vehicles.

The Germans tried to mislead the Russians as to their real objective by demonstrations against the southern coast of Oesel; and by spreading the rumor through their Intelligence Service that the expedition was to be sent against St. Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland.

The important provisions of the final plan of von Hutier were as follows:

1. a. General von Katten will command the entire expeditionary forces.
- b. The Naval Commander will be in charge until landing; thereafter he will be subject to the order of General von Katten.
- c. After landing, General von Esteroff will be in charge

of the troops ashore.

Naval Component.

2. The Navy will sweep the channel secretly to the vicinity of Oesel Island at once. Under cover of darkness, the night before the landing, this channel will be extended to reach Tagga Bay.
3. The Navy will convoy the transports to Tagga Bay and will secure them from hostile submarine and surface craft.
4. The naval forces will assist in the capture of Arensburg and the Sworbe Peninsula.
5. A force of destroyers will cover the landing near Pamerrort and protect the left flank of the Cyclist Force during their march to Orissar.

Army Components.

6. Initial landings to be made at daybreak: main landing at Tagga Bay, secondary landing on selected beaches at Pamerrort.
7. Tagga Bay.
  - a. A Beach-head Force of 3,600 men will land and overcome all local hostile resistance and form a beach-head for the main body.
  - b. As soon as the beach-head has been established; the main body will land, drive southward, capture and occupy Arensburg and the Sworbe Peninsula, and thereafter defend the island.
8. Pamerrort.
  - a. A secondary landing force of 2,000 including two Cyclist battalions, will land on the beaches southwest of Pamerrort, with the mission of blocking a Russian retirement from Oesel to Moon Island and preventing any reinforcement reaching the Oesel garrison by way of the causeway from Moon Island.
  - b. Immediately upon landing, one Cyclist battalion

will move rapidly eastward to Orissar, seize the causeway and prevent the passage of the enemy in either direction. The remaining Cyclist battalion will at once move south toward Arensburg, harass the hostile rear, and in case the enemy's reserve at Arensburg withdraws, delay its retirement, in order to prevent the battalion at Orissar from being overrun before reinforcement can arrive from the main landing at Tagga Bay. (9)

6. THE VOYAGE.- (Map No. 2) The weather changed for the better, and orders were issued for the embarkation to commence on the morning of the 9th. At noon on October 10, Commander Rosenberg's flotilla of mine sweepers, followed by three transports with the Pamerrort landing party, sailed from Libau to complete the channel through the mine fields; marking this channel with screened light ships to the rendezvous, Point White, nine miles off Tagga Bay. By the evening of October 10, the transport fleet and supply ships were loaded and anchored in the harbor of Libau, ready to put to sea.

Upon arrival of the battleship squadrons early 11 October, the fleet was organized (Chart 1) and sailed.

The Fleet proceeded unmolested and unobserved by the enemy until dusk. Then the "Friedrick der Grosse" and "Konig Albert" left the formation to bombard the Sworbe Peninsula. Shortly before midnight, three destroyers were detached to bombard the air field at Papensholm and the town Keilkond. At midnight the fleet overtook Rosenberg's flotilla of mine sweepers, who could not make good over three knots, because of an adverse sea. The speed of the fleet was changed to conform with this. Soon Admiral Schmidt realized, that to arrive at Tagga Bay before dawn, it would be necessary to pass the mine sweepers and run

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(9) FMG pp 245-247; GVT pp 18-42.

the risk of the Russian mines. He decided upon this bolder course. The fleet proceeded the mine sweepers, arriving off Point White shortly after 3:00 A.M. (10)

7. NAVAL BOMBARDMENT.- (Map No. 2) Before daylight on October 12, the Fleet took station for the bombardment of the coastal fortifications as follows: The Third Battle Squadron (5 battleships) steamed to position "5" to fire upon the Nanist Battery. The Fourth Battle Squadron moved to "4" to bombard the Hundsort Battery. "Bayern" took station at "6", and the "Emden" at "7", to fire upon the Toffri battery, and support the landing at Pamerrort.

The "Grosser Kurfurst" and the "Bayern" struck mines; but due to good damage control, for which German ships are famous, were able to proceed on their mission. However, just as the "Bayern" struck the mine, several lookouts reported a periscope and the broadside guns opened fire. This firing was heard by Admiral Schmidt at 5:20 A.M., and he, supposing the "Bayern" and the "Emden" to be engaged with the coastal batteries, sent the signal by radio for the entire Fleet to commence firing.

The Hundsort battery opened fire upon the "Moltke", but was silenced in one half hour, by the converging fire of the Fourth Battle Squadron.

The Ninast Battery never opened fire, although manned, for the first few salvos of the Third Battle Squadron destroyed its control station and one gun of the Battery. Likewise the Pamerrort Battery and batteries located on Sworbe Peninsula did not return the fire of the ships bombarding them.

The Toffri Battery did reply but was soon silenced by the combined firing of the "Bayern" and "Emden". (11)

8. THE MAIN LANDING AT TAGGA BAY.- (Map No. 3) A force

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(10) GVT pp 34-37.

(11) FMG p 248 .

of 3,600 officers and men had been designated to land in three waves (see Chart 2), clear the beaches of all hostile resistance, and form a shallow beach-head around Tagga Bay. Then the main body was to steam in and land under the protection of this beach-head. The Naval Commander of this Beach-head Force, Captain Heinecke, was at the rendezvous, Point White, with 11 destroyers; which had on board the larger part of the second wave. The first wave was to be landed from power boats furnished by the Third Battle Squadron, and scheduled to leave Point White at 4:00 A.M. Captain Heinecke waited until 4:40 A.M., but the first wave had not arrived. This was so late, that even if it did arrive shortly; the slow power boats could not reach the beach, nine miles away, before a half hour after daylight. Captain Heinecke took the bold course. Leaving word for the other waves to follow as soon as they arrived (the first wave arrived at 4:45 A.M.), he started for the beach with his fast destroyers, to land the second wave. (12) This action was dangerous, for his destroyers would offer perfect targets to the enemy artillery in the early morning light, and he might find it hard to land his troops as he had few small power boats.

By 5:20 A.M., just before the general firing commenced, his destroyers arrived off the beaches. Disembarkation began immediately, with maximum use being made of the few power boats present. Many of the German soldiers, with arms and equipment, jumped overboard and waded ashore through water breast high.

Several field batteries concealed in the woods on the eastern shore, opened fire upon the destroyers, and the 131st Infantry landing on the western shore near White Hill, but did little damage. Supported by the fire from the destroyers, the ~~assembled units~~ advanced on both shores and covered the dis-

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(12) GVT pp 39-40.

embarkation of the following waves. The resistance offered by the Russian Infantry was negligible at this time. By 7:00 A.M. the 138th Infantry had captured two batteries after a brisk skirmish on the eastern shore of the bay. The 131st Infantry on the western shore had taken two batteries without a fight. One of these, they had found abandoned, and the crew of the other was still in the dugout. For the past nine days the Russians had been often alerted, and discipline had sunk so low that they had ceased to respond to an alarm. The men had painted their buttons red and were wearing Soviet emblems.

The Assault Company landed, without suffering any losses, near the mouth on both sides of the bay, and moved rapidly to the sea coast batteries. Within an hour both the batteries at Hundsfort and Ninast Points had been captured.

About this time three transports, with the third wave, steamed into the bay. The "Coriska" struck a mine at the entrance and immediately took on a heavy list. Destroyers came along side, at once, and took off all the troops with their equipment. The German soldiers during this operation showed a marked coolness and orderliness, which spoke much for their discipline. The "Coriska" was immediately beached.

Mine sweepers rushed in to investigate, and found that the Russians had laid, recently, a new mine field across the entrance to Tagga Bay. By good fortune, every ship except the "Coriska" had passed through a narrow channel of this mine field into the Bay. The mine sweepers commenced immediately to clear away these mines. Shortly after 8:00 A.M. the troops which had been removed from the "Coriska" were landed, and all units of the Beach-head Force were ashore.

The transports with the main body had arrived at Point

White by 6:45 A.M., and had been signaled to come in. By 8:45 A.M. the first transport had arrived in Tagga Bay and disembarkation was immediately started. By 11:00 A.M. even ammunition and rations were being rapidly landed.

As soon as the transports with the Main Body had anchored in the Bay, a single anti-submarine net was laid across the entrance. Within 72 hours a second net had been added. Two other nets, each  $7\frac{1}{2}$  miles long, were laid from Hundsort Point, extending north and northeast.

Lieutenant General von Esteroff landed and assumed command. General von Kathen, commanding the entire expeditionary force, remained aboard the flagship "Moltke" thus maintaining close contact with the naval forces.

The unloading progressed so rapidly that by evening of October 15, six transports had been unloaded and had started their return trip to Libau for the second echelon. Two days later the remaining transports sailed. (13)

9. THE LANDING AT PAMERRORT.- (Map No.3) The landing at Pamerrort was unopposed in any way, except by fire from Taffri Battery, which was soon silenced by the "Bayern" and the "Emden". By 7:30 A.M. the first troops were ashore, and before 10:30 A.M. the entire force had been landed with the exception of the artillery. The artillery was unable to be landed for several days. Upon landing a search was immediately made for the battery reported to be located at Pamerrort by the German aviators, but no battery could be found. (14)

10. CONCLUSION. As we have seen the initial phases of this expedition was a complete success. This was probably due to the careful preparation, the lack of any great resistance

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(13) GVT pp37-41; FMG pp 249-251. (14) FMG pp252-253.

from the Russians, the readiness of the German Commanders of all ranks to take risks, the control of the air, the cooperation of the Army and the Navy, and much luck. Which of these factors contributed most to the success is a matter of opinion, but at least it can be said the expedition was well planned and well executed.

CHART I

The composition and formation of the German Fleet as it sailed from Windau:

<u>Rosenberg's Flotilla of Mine-searchers,</u> the steamers Castor, Coburg, Donau; light-ships to be dropped.	) ) already in advance ) since noon October 10
<u>II Flotilla of Mine-searches</u>	) on its way from ) Windau, not arriving ) until dark.
II Flotilla of torpedo-boats, Blitz, tender, Corsika ) transport steamers Equity ) Ammon (II Division of Mine sweepers) <u>Third Squadron: Konig, Kronprinz,</u> Grosser, Kurfust, and Markgraf, (battleships). <u>Moltke</u> (battle cruiser) flag ship of the fleet (1)	) ) pertaining to the ) <u>advance guard.</u> ) ) ) covered by the 6th Flotilla ) of torpedo-boats and the ) 15th Half-flotilla.
<u>Emden</u> (light cruiser) <u>Fourth Squadron: Kaiser, Kaiserin,</u> Prinzregent, Luitpold, Friedrich der Grosse, Konig Albert, ( battle- ships).	) )

The transport fleet followed at a considerable distance.

Transport fleet	(2d Section of Mine-breakers )	covered by the 7th and 19th Half-flotillas of Torpedo- boats.
	(Frankfurt (light cruiser) )	
	(Unit for net Defense of the Baltic )	
	(Steamer Oswald (pioneer mother-ship) )	
	(Santa Elena (Aviation mother-ship) )	
	(Konigsberg (light cruiser) )	
	(4 transport vessels )	
	(Danzig (light cruiser) )	
	(3 transport vessels )	
	(Karlsruhe (light cruiser) )	
(5 transport vessels )		
(Nurnberg (light cruiser) )		
(4 transport vessels )		

(15)

CHART 2

THE BEACH-HEAD FORCE.

<u>WAVE</u>	<u>UNITS IN ORDER</u>	<u>STRENGTH</u>	<u>CARRIED BY</u>
1st	9th Company, 131st Infantry	420	10 motor-sailers to be furnished from ships of the Third Battle Squadron
	1st Company, 138th Infantry		3 patrol boats from the mine-sweeper flotilla
2d	65th Infantry Brigade Staff	1,030	11 destroyers of the Second Destroyers Flotilla, and 10 motor- sailers from the mine- sweeper flotilla
	10th Assault Company 3d Battalion, 131st Infantry (less 9th Company) 1st Battalion, 138th Infantry (less 1st C Company)		
	2d Battalion, 131st Infantry	530	Steamer Blitz
	1st Battalion, 131st Infantry	840	Steamer Equity
	2d Battalion, 138th Infantry	780	Steamer Corsika
<hr/>			
Total strength of Beach-head Force: 3,600 officers and men.			

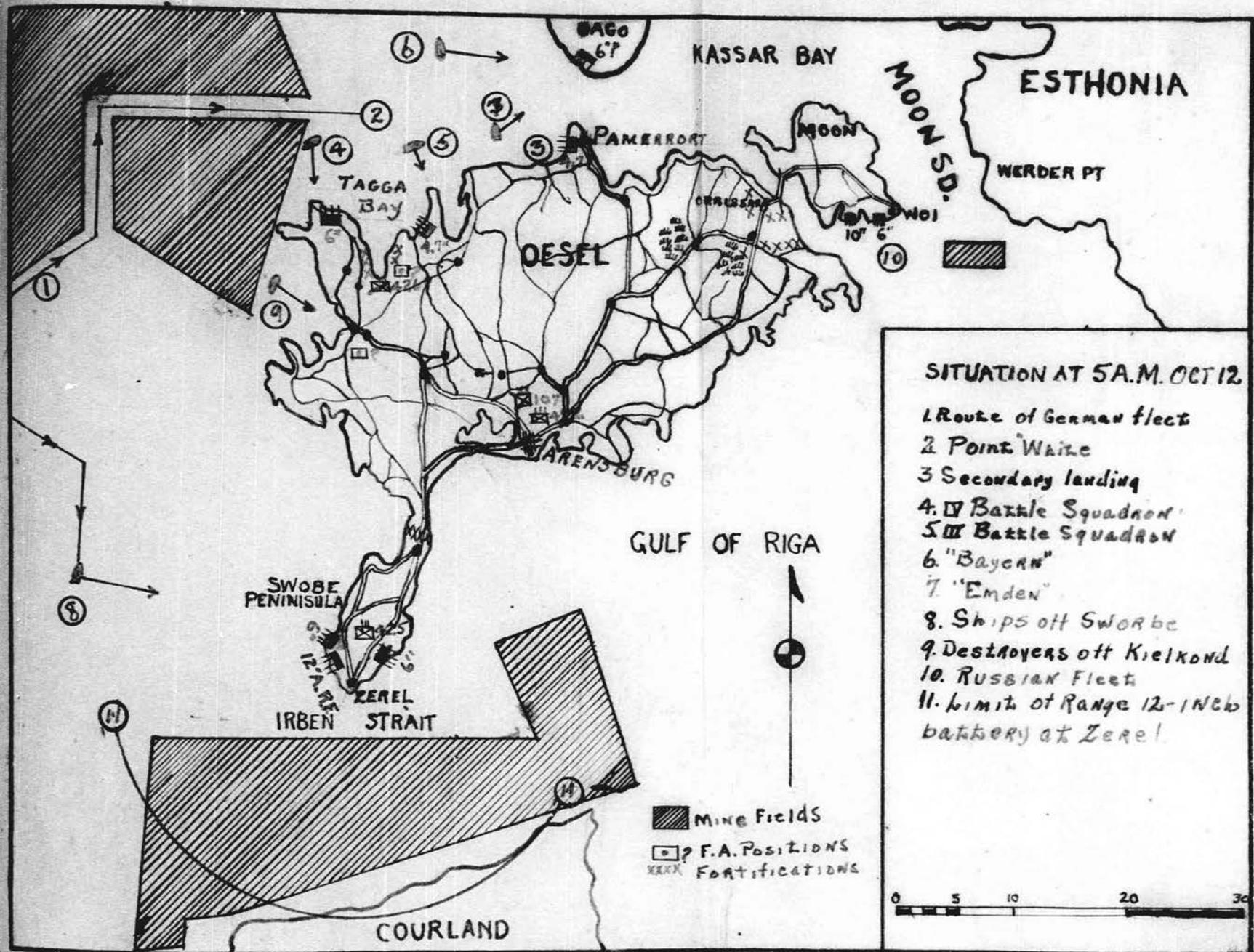
CHART 3

THE PAMERRORT LANDING PARTY

UNITS	STRENGTH	CARRIED BY
Flotilla Landing Force	200	Torpedo boats
18th Assault Company	250	
Bluejackets	130	Auxiliary ship Castor.
Naval artillerists	40	(Note: 2 horses and 1
Detachment of 2d Cyclist Battalion	650	field kitchen also carried.)
1st Cyclist Battalion	650	Auxiliary ship Coburg (Note: 2 field guns of the 8th Battery, 1 caisson, and 30 horses also carried here.)
2d Cyclist Battalion (less detachment)	415	Repair ship Donau. (Note: 2 automobiles and 1 light radio set were al- so carried.)
Total	1,935	



MAP 1.



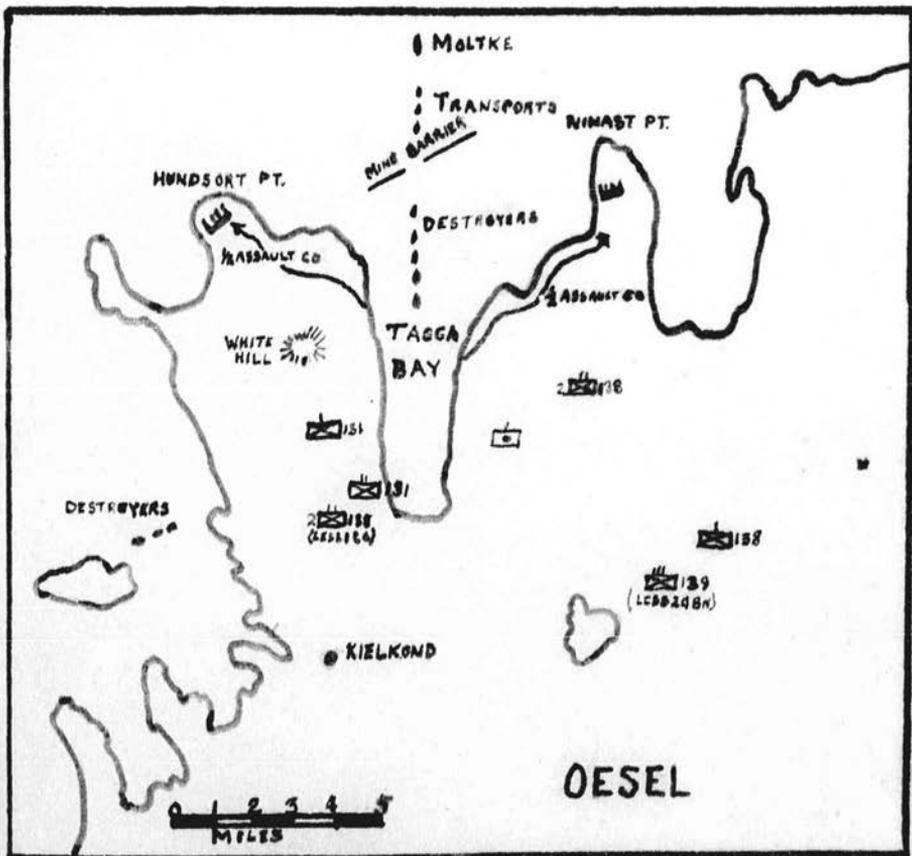
SITUATION AT 5 A.M. OCT 12.

- 1 Route of German fleet
- 2 Point White
- 3 Secondary landing
- 4  $\square$  Battle Squadron
- 5  $\square$  Battle Squadron
- 6 "Bayern"
- 7 "Emden"
8. Ships off Sworbe
9. Destroyers off Kielkond
10. Russian Fleet
11. limit of Range 12-1 Neb battery at Zerel.

$\blacksquare$  Mine Fields  
 $\square$  F.A. Positions  
 XXXX Fortifications



MAP 2



MAP 3