

Joint Operation Aspects of the Okinawa Campaign

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This is the first in a series of three articles on this subject by Colonel Killilae. The second and third articles will appear in subsequent issues of the MILITARY REVIEW.—The Editor.

Introduction

OKINAWA, which is about sixty-five miles long and averages about five miles in width, is roughly divided into almost equal northern and southern parts by the Ishikawa Isthmus. The northern area is generally rugged, mountainous, wooded, undeveloped, and of little military value. The southern area, which is generally rolling, but frequently broken by deep gullies and ravines, is the developed part of the island and contains a major portion of the island's 400,000 population. As anticipated the strongest defenses of the island were in the southern area.

From many standpoints the Okinawa operation was one of the most difficult ever undertaken by our forces in the Pacific. It was defended by about 120,000 men (including natives serving with the combat forces) with some tanks and the heaviest concentration of artillery ever encountered in the Pacific. Possible reinforcements in the Nansei-Shoto chain were estimated as some 60,000. Larger forces were available on Formosa, Kyushu, and in the Shanghai area. The most serious threat, however, was its closeness to the Japanese homeland, easily within air

striking distance. Severe damage and losses, therefore, had to be expected and accepted as the price of success.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff issued the directive for "Operation Iceberg," as the Okinawa Campaign was known, to CINC POA (Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Area) late in September 1944. In turn, late in October 1944, CINC POA issued a directive, for planning purposes, to all units to be involved in the operation, with a target date (L-day) of 1 March 1945. This date, however, was later changed to 1 April. The overall command of the operation was assigned to the Fifth Fleet. The Joint Expeditionary Force commander was to be in command during the assault phase of the operation and to remain so until such time as our forces were declared secure on the island. The Navy retained control until 17 May 1945, when command of all forces passed to the Commanding General, Tenth Army.

In the planning phase of the Okinawa Campaign, three assumptions were made which later proved to be fully justified. It was assumed: (1) that the Iwo Jima Operation would be completed at a sufficiently early date to permit availability of fire support units and close air support units for the assault on Okinawa; (2) the results of operations against Japan proper, Formosa, the Ryukyus, and the enemy fleet during the period preceding the target date indicated that we would be able to maintain constant con-

trol of the air in the target area and; (3) that ground elements, assault shipping and supporting naval forces would be released promptly from the Philippine operations.

The object of the Okinawa Campaign was: (1) to establish bases from which to attack the main islands of Japan and their sea approaches, support further operations in the regions bordering on the sea coast of China, and sever Japanese sea and air communications between the Empire and the rest of her occupied territory; (2) to establish secure sea and air communications for ourselves through the East China Sea to the coast of China, and; (3) to maintain unremitting military pressure against Japan.

Navy Phase

Joint Expeditionary Forces, or Task Force 51, had five subordinate task forces. Their titles and task force numbers were:

- TF 52 Amphibious Support Force,
- TF 53 Northern Attack Force,
- TF 54 Gunfire and Covering Force,
- TF 55 Southern Attack Force,
- TF 56 Expeditionary Troops.

Task Force 51 was given multiple missions as follows:

1. Capture, occupy and defend Okinawa.
2. Destroy or drive off enemy forces attempting to interfere with the movement to, or the landing operations at, the objective.
3. Direct the operations of aircraft of the Joint Expeditionary Force and those which may be designated from other forces for the air support of landings.
4. Direct mine-sweeping operations.
5. Initiate base development and the establishment of military government.
6. Prepare to complete the occupation of Okinawa and to capture and occupy Ie Shima as a continuation of this operation.

The British furnished a carrier force

to take part in this operation. This Task Force (No. 57), under Fifth Fleet, was directed to maintain, after L-10 and until further orders, the neutralization of airfields in the Sakishima group of islands, nearly mid-way between Okinawa and Formosa. This task force was to provide its own logistic support and plan of operations subject to approval of Commander, Fifth Fleet.

The U.S. Carrier Force, Task Force 58, also directly under Fifth Fleet, participated in the operation, and will be discussed in the section under air support.

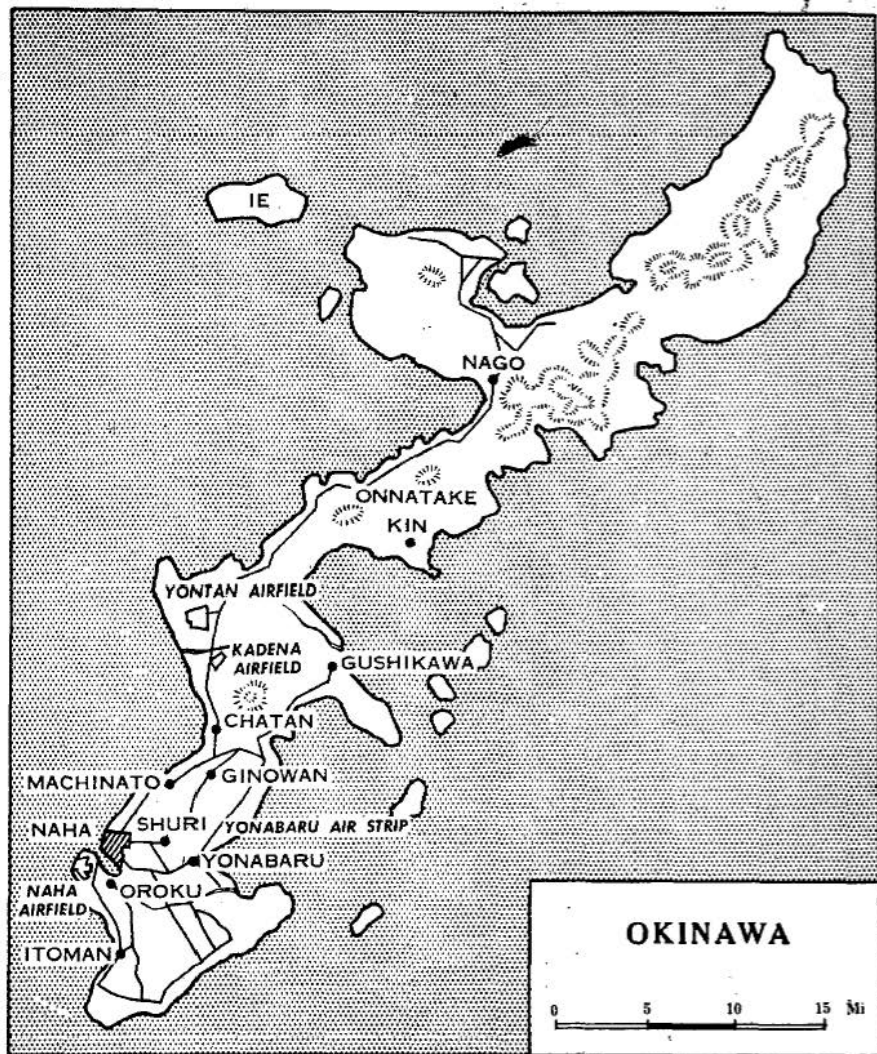
The Commander, Forward Area, Central Pacific, Task Force 94 (a command perhaps comparable to the commander of the intermediate section of a large army communications zone) was given naval escort, and the authority to call on other naval forces for air support.

An unofficial aggregate of forces involved in this operation included over 1,600 surface vessels, forty-three groups of aircraft, and 500,000 personnel, of which 350,000 were navy.

The first mission for the Joint Expeditionary Force, and the mission with which we are primarily interested, was as follows: "This force will capture, occupy and defend positions in the Okinawa Islands beginning L-day minus 6, and initiate the development of advanced naval bases and air bases on the captured islands in order to establish control of the sea and air in the Nansei-Shoto area." (Note—The term Nansei-Shoto includes the entire chain of islands, of which Okinawa is the heart, between Formosa and Japan.)

The accomplishment of this mission was planned in three phases covering a period from L-6 (26 March 1945) to an estimated L+120 (29 July 1945).

Planning and preparation progressed concurrently with operations then being conducted. Strategic and tactical air support, naval gunfire support, movement



schedules, assembly of troops and supplies were carried out with a seeming minimum of changes. In the months from October 1944 to March 1945 the advances of the American forces by the campaigns of Leyte and Luzon, the reoccupation of the Philippines, the smashing of the main Jap fleet in late October and the capture of Iwo Jima had made possible the establishment of advance naval and air bases, and had given increased control of sea and air. In the words of General Marshall, "It was now possible to drive forward into the Ryukyus along the main Japanese archipelago bordering the East China Sea."

In reviewing the actual operations, there are a few items that appear necessary to highlight the naval action:

The protection of the hundreds of naval vessels to be engaged in the operation made necessary the innovation of an around-the-islands "radar picket" system. This system placed a minimum of nine stations around the islands in designated operating areas. The radar picket circle was established to provide early warning of the approach of enemy aircraft, particularly low-flying planes, and also to facilitate interception at as great a distance as possible from the transport area. The pickets carried fighter-director equipment as well as the scanning apparatus.

These radar pickets absorbed the brunt of 560 raids from over 2,200 planes during the period from 26 March to 17 May. Of the original nineteen ships on which fighter-director equipment was installed, five were sunk, eight were seriously damaged and three others received minor damage.

Plans for the operation had considered the use of floating radar pickets only until outlying islands could be secured and the necessary installations made. However, the heavy casualties suffered by the radar pickets called for an unexpectedly large replacement of personnel and

equipment. Operations were juggled to permit earlier than planned seizure of five of the necessary outlying islands. As a result of these developments, there were times in the early stages when the picket system was not fully effective.

In the Okinawa operation, the Navy had only one surface engagement other than with the hundreds of small suicide boats encountered. This surface engagement occurred on 7 April when an enemy task force composed of the battleship *Yamato*, a cruiser and eight destroyers, were intercepted by U.S. Carrier Force planes. All enemy vessels except four destroyers were sunk, and the four destroyers were heavily damaged. This can be considered the final blow to Jap naval prestige.

Underwater demolition team training, organization and supply are a navy responsibility. For the Okinawa operation ten teams were used. Missions assigned and executed varied through preliminary beach reconnaissance beginning L-7. These included diversionary demolitions on selected beaches, removal of obstacles on assault beaches from L-2 to L-day, use as guides on assault control boats on L-day and later assistance in clearing anchorages of underwater debris, blasting channels and trimming reef edges.

The magnitude of the communications requirements for an amphibious operation of this size is enormous. Use of a fleet broadcast controlled by the Commander, Joint Expeditionary Force, better assignment and utilization of frequencies, and improved ship-to-shore circuits, also used for transmitting press releases, were features. In all of the after-action reports noted, it was interesting to find that navy troubles with security and the need for additional communications personnel were emphasized.

The Gunfire and Covering Force, Task Force 54, supported all landings, provided continuous reinforcement to the Ground Forces throughout the operation,

engaged in small boat counter-measures, and insured cover for the whole force in the vicinity of the objective against hostile surface attacks. The coordinated fires of ten battleships, nine cruisers, twenty-three destroyers and 177 gunboats provided pre-H-hour bombardment of beaches on L-day. Beginning L-day, target information centers were maintained by Tenth Army, III Amphibious Corps, and XXIV Corps in close coordination with the respective naval intelligence and gunnery officers. All deep fire support was coordinated by the Tenth Army Artillery Officer. All targets located by air or ground observers, or by means of photographs, were reported to the center responsible for the sector in which they were located, and then assigned to fire support ships, artillery, or air support. Certain "no gun-fire lines" and "lanes" were established. Some small troubles in this coordination occurred. Direct fire support ships were initially assigned at two per regiment but later this was changed to one, except in case of special attacks. Over 25,000 tons of naval fire support ammunition had been expended by L+46.

Considering the use of navy fire support positions around the entire island, it is interesting to note that thirty-four ships, continuously assigned to fire support missions during twenty of the first forty-six days, were on firing assignment for an average of nearly sixty-two per cent of the time, day and night.

The naval gunfire plan of the Okinawa operation was better than previous gunfire plans in that it was more flexible, and that gunfire communications were better. For the first time, ships assigned to the Gunfire and Covering Force constituted a permanent organization, ships once assigned remained assigned and were not rotated with the screen or other duties. In addition, the higher level fire support plans had previously designated a specific ship to fire each planned mission.

This time the mission was given, and the Commander, Task Force 54, was permitted to designate the ships to fire.

The Joint Expeditionary Force smoke plan provided a plan for covering anchorages with smoke during enemy air attacks at night. During the action, and with the exception of use during underwater demolition team operations, mock landings, the landing at Ie Shima and during mine-sweeping operations, smoke was used only during darkness by the Navy. The deduced reasons for limiting the use of smoke to night time are that the radar directed anti-aircraft guns can still fire, the radar equipped night-fighters can still function, and the fire-power of the visually operated anti-aircraft guns in daytime more than offset the value of the smoke screen and decrease in daytime visibility. In addition, of course, was the highly efficient operation of our daytime air-fighters.

Fleet logistic problems presented for this operation were enormous. As previously mentioned, over 1,600 ships and over 350,000 naval personnel were involved, plus the transport of the Ground Forces and their supplies. Ports from Seattle to Leyte were involved. The decentralizing of authority and responsibility were expected. CINC POA and other high headquarters provided the top-level coordination and arrangements. Initial logistic requirements for the operation had been made before L-90, and, at about that date, scheduled conferences were started between logistic representatives of the services concerned. For carrying out the plan under Fifth Fleet, the Logistic Support Group, Service Squadron 10, and the Forward Area Force were the operating agencies. Under Joint Expeditionary Force no separate logistic group was established, each headquarters being responsible for its own participation. In general, this administrative setup operated satisfactorily. The problems regarding

ship and plane fuel, ammunition, lubricating oil, food, spare parts, and ship salvage and repair were the major ones. The only unsatisfactory items reported were the delivery of mail and registered publications, plus some transportation difficulties in delivering naval replacement personnel.

The ships' salvage and repair problem was huge due to the damage inflicted by the hundreds of suicide aircraft and small boat attacks. However, many ships were returned to duty by repairs made in combat area bases.

The Okinawa operation was the most thoroughly reported naval action in the history of Pacific warfare. More press and radio correspondents were accredited for this operation than ever before. Several small ships including LCIs were assigned for public relations duty. A highlight of the public relations activities were the radio broadcasts direct from the Okinawa area. Listening audiences were estimated to have been as high as sixty-five million people.

The amphibious operations for the capture of Okinawa, in terms of ships employed, naval gunfire delivered, naval air support conducted, and the magnitude of the logistics problems and distances involved may well be considered the largest in the Pacific Ocean warfare.

Air Support Phase

The planning for the air support of the Okinawa operation embraced three principal responsibilities: First, the preliminary aerial bombardment and reconnaissance of the operational and supporting enemy areas; second, the direct preparation and support of the assault; and third, the maintenance of air superiority, air defense, and continued neutralization of enemy air installations during and immediately following the operation.

Supporting Forces.—The forces and assigned tasks for the air support plan consisted of:

a. The 20th Bomber Command, a B-29 force, operating from the Marianas, with the requirement of directing all available sorties on Formosa, beginning 2 March or L-30. Then they were to strike the air installations on Formosa again, the Pescadores, and Sakishima Gunto, starting on 16 March. This action was to be in cooperation with the Southwest Pacific Air Force, and was to precede the scheduled carrier strikes on Formosa on 18 March, continuing through 1 April or L-day, until the capture of Okinawa was accomplished.

b. The 21st Bomber Command, also in the Marianas, was directed to make photo-reconnaissance of the Nansei-Shoto between 9-20 March. Actually, however, the 21st Bomber Command had already taken some excellent pictures of the area as early as 29 September 1944.

c. The 14th Air Force, in the China Theater, was to strike Hong Kong installations and mine the harbor for three days starting 18 March, or L-14.

d. The Strategic AF, Pacific Ocean Area, also based in the Marianas was given the mission of neutralizing the Nanpo Shoto, which includes the Volcano and Bonin Islands; and of striking air installations in Japan as practicable. Search for and destruction of enemy picket boats was also required of this Air Force.

e. The Southwest Pacific Area AF, was directed to attack enemy air bases on Formosa in coordination with the B-29 strikes from the Marianas. This force was also required to furnish an offensive screen of navy long range patrol bombers against enemy search planes and patrol vessels in order to cover the water movement of forces approaching Okinawa.

f. A Carrier Force, TF 58, was to make strikes on Jap air installations on Formosa, the Pescadores and Sakishima Gunto on L-14 (18 March), in coordination with the land based B-24s and B-29s. Then,

after striking Okinawa on L-9, and the two succeeding days, the carriers were to operate eastward of Okinawa to support the assault, if needed. They were also to neutralize, without orders, any active fields on Tokuna, Kikai Jima and Minami, three small islands north of Okinawa. This force was also to stand by to augment the direct support of the escort carrier force if called for by the Commander, Joint Expeditionary Forces. Later developments changed the mission of this carrier force.

g. Escort carriers were to provide air cover for the approach and assault by the expeditionary forces. Also, to provide aircraft for air defense until fields on Okinawa were usable. In addition, they were to maintain sustained neutralization attacks on Okinawa and adjacent islands beginning about L-7.

h. An Amphibious Support Force was responsible for establishing a floating sea-plane base in Kerama Retto, which was accomplished on schedule.

i. Transport carriers brought replacement naval aircraft, and some of those of the Tactical Air Force to the objective area. The land based air operations were carried out as directed. Hong Kong, Formosa, the Pescadores and Sakishima Gunto were successfully neutralized.

Task Force 58 broke off from the Iwo Jima engagement late in February and steamed westward to Nansei-Shoto. There, on 1 March, planes were launched for a reconnaissance of the islands, which was conducted with no material Japanese opposition. The resulting photographs were of excellent value in bringing the early pictures made by the 21st Bomber Command in September 1944 up to date. The force then retired to Ulithi for a ten day period of regrouping and logistic replenishment.

On 14 March (L-18), the Task Force departed from Ulithi and proceeded directly to Japan. On 18 and 19 March, from

a position 100 miles southeast of Kyushu, air strikes were launched against airfields to eliminate future air resistance to our Okinawa operation. Enemy fleet units at Kobe and Kure were also attacked with considerable success. The force then slowly retired southward, continuing strikes on Jap airfields.

In this four day engagement, Task Force 58 destroyed 528 enemy planes, damaged sixteen surface craft and smashed scores of air installations. Our own air losses were 116 planes. As a result of this operation, the enemy was unable to mount any strong air attacks against our forces on Okinawa for a week after the initial landing. On 24 March, the battleships of the carrier force bombarded the southeast coast of Okinawa as a diversionary move to cover the actual location of the landing beaches.

When the invasion of the island started on 1 April, the carriers began a series of almost continuous strikes and combat air patrols in direct support of the landing. For a few days there was little enemy air opposition, then on 6 April, wave after wave of Jap fighters, bombers and *kamikazes* came crashing in against ground forces and supporting naval units. On this one day 248 enemy planes were knocked down, at a cost of only two of ours. These statistics are cited merely to indicate the ferocity of the enemy attack.

The Carrier Force then proceeded northward, and, on 7 April, attacked strong Japanese fleet units in the East China Sea, off Kyushu; sinking one battleship, one cruiser and four destroyers. From then on, for the balance of the operation, the force was engaged in alternately repelling suicidal air attacks at Okinawa and in striking Kyushu.

The carriers withdrew from the operation on 10 June, and retired to the Gulf of Leyte to lick their wounds; of which they had plenty. The box score for this

force alone over a period of nearly three months was over 2,300 enemy planes destroyed at a cost of less than 600 of their own aircraft.

A British carrier force was also assigned to the Fifth Fleet to assist in the air support of the Okinawa assault. From 26 March to 20 April, and again from 4 May to 25 May, planes from this force repeatedly struck Sakishima Gunto in support of the main effort. Despite heavy Japanese air attacks not one of the ships of this force was put out of action.

Tactical Air Force Ryukyus was the designation of the air component of the force which occupied Okinawa. This air force consisted of a marine aircraft wing, an AAF fighter wing, a bomber command and necessary air service units.

When this air force was activated in Oahu, in December 1944, there was a reluctance on the part of the furnishing agencies to provide staff personnel of adequate rank and experience for the necessary planning. Many members of this staff continued for some time to perform part time functions in other Hawaiian air commands.

The units comprising the air force were widely scattered, and as a result, loading and embarkation took place on the American west coast, the Hawaiian area, the Marshalls, Russels, Marianas, Western Carolines, and the Philippines. Two groups of marine day and night fighters were catapulted ashore from the escort carriers on 8 and 10 April. During the period ending 30 June, two additional marine fighter groups and three army fighter groups were called in and became operational. There were also three marine night fighter squadrons, one army night fighter and two marine torpedo bomber squadrons placed in operation on Okinawa and Ie Shima during that period. In the meantime an army medium bomber group had arrived, and two heavy and one light army bomber groups had been ordered in. None

of the Army Air Forces tactical airplanes arrived until the middle of May.

The general mission of the Tactical Air Force was to occupy air bases when secured and commence tactical operations in support of the assault forces, and to assume the responsibility for air defense as rapidly as the situation ashore permitted. The specific mission of this force consisted of three phases in the following order of priority:

a. To gain air superiority by means of destruction of enemy aircraft in the air and on the ground, and by attacks on enemy air installations.

b. To prevent the movement of hostile troops and supplies into or within the objective area.

c. To give direct support to the ground forces in the battle area.

The Commander, Joint Expeditionary Force had control of all aircraft in the operation during the assault.

Coordination of ground forces and support was exercised by the commander, Air Support Control Unit afloat during the initial assault, and after the beachhead was firmly established by three landing force air support control units, one with each corps and one in overall control with the Army. These units controlled all aircraft, both carrier and land based, allocated for ground support by the senior commander, Air Support Control Unit, acting in the name of the Expeditionary Force commander. Air defense remained with the above control agency until the Air Defense Command was fully operational ashore and radar installations were functioning. However, the Air Defense Command remained under the operational control of the commander, Air Support Control Unit, until the island was secured.

In the majority of cases, close coordination existed between artillery, naval gunfire and air support. This was particularly true when the Air Support Control Unit

and the naval gunfire officers were right in the artillery fire direction center.

Except in some cases where called air assaults arrived late, the air support was generally excellent. Good ground targets were scarce and small so large air strikes employing more than one or two squadrons were hardly ever profitable or required. The Japs in their inter-connected caves were hard to get at. Small bombs were useless, and napalm would only burn off the camouflage around the cave mouths. It was found, however that thousand pound bombs with delay fuzes would seal caves or shake down the roofs.

Air bases on Okinawa were developed under control of the island commander. Both Yontan and Kadena airfields were secured by 1300 on L-day, and Yontan was ready for emergency landing on 3 April. The land based fighter groups started operating from Yontan on L+7,

and two days later also from Kadena. Heavy enemy air attacks toward the end of the first week, diverted most of our planes from the direct air support of our ground forces. Definite air superiority was maintained throughout, even though many enemy planes did manage to slip through our defense. The ring of radar picket ships took the worse beating, however, from nearly continuous Jap air attacks, including many *kamikaze* attempts. This called for fighter cover for those ships, and further reduced the number of fighters available for ground support. Starting on L+8, C-54 transports were employed in the air evacuation of casualties. During the first seventy-five days of the operation, over 15,000 casualties were moved out by this means. L-5 aircraft were also used for this purpose after their arrival on L+35 and in one nineteen day period evacuated 1,200 casualties.

The aspects of our National security have changed many times since the Marine Corps was established 171 years ago. The basic concept, however, which brought the Marine Corps into being has not changed, but has been expanded, strengthened and reaffirmed by frequent, and recent, demonstrations. This concept envisions that our national security requires that the Navy have ever at its disposal a body of fighting troops, thoroughly indoctrinated in Navy ways, subject to naval command, discipline and law, and specially trained to perform military duties of an essentially naval nature.

The U.S. Marine Corps is such a body.

General Alexander A. Vandergriff