

THE OPERATIONS OF THE SECOND MARINE DIVISION IN THE CAPTURE  
OF BETIO ISLAND, TARAWA ATOLL, 20-23 NOVEMBER 1943

(Personal experience of a Battalion Intelligence Officer)

Type of operation described; Amphibious

ASSAULT OF A DEFENDED ATOLL

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13003

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the Second Marine Division, in the capture of Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll from 20 to and including 23 November, 1943.

The situation in the Pacific Theatre leading up to the time of the Gilbert Islands operation was briefly as follows:

U. S. Army troops had completed their mission and were installed in the Aleutians with the occupation of Kiska in August 1943.

In the Southwest Pacific General McArthur's forces had come up from Port Moresby and in October had taken Finchaven.

The Guadalcanal Campaign, successfully completed, had provided further opportunities in the South Pacific - namely, the conquest of New Georgia, Rendova and Vella Lavella.

On 1 November 1943, the 3rd Marine Division landed at Empress Augusta Bay on Bougainville Island.

The landings on New Britain were not to come until late in December. (1)

The month of November disclosed heavy air attacks on many Japanese bases. General Kenny's growing air-force struck heavily at the city of Rabual, New Britain's excellent harbor. Both carrier and land-based aircraft continued to strike hard at many of the enemy's most valuable bases.

Gradually, allied air and naval forces were growing stronger and more daring.

Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, upon recommendations of his staff, had made a decision to open a new theatre and begin an offensive against the Japanese through the Central Pacific.

Vice Admiral Raymond A. Spruance was appointed Commander Central Pacific - thus the planning for an invasion of the Gilbert Islands and the assembling of the force to accomplish this mission had begun.

The Gilberts made up part of the outer perimeter of the Japanese Pacific defenses. In rear of this perimeter was located the enemy's main ocean defenses and the Empire of Japan itself. Capture of these islands would facilitate the progress toward one of our eventual war aims - the defeat of Japan. The Gilbert Islands also constituted a threat to our shipping lanes from Hawaii to the South Pacific.

At this time little was known about the Gilberts as a military objective.

#### GEOGRAPHY

Geographically, these islands consist of a line of 16 atolls lying across the equator about 400 miles west of the International Date Line.

The center of the group is 2500 miles southwest of Hawaii and about 3000 miles southeast of Japan. Thirteen hundred miles to the northwest is located Truk, the Japanese fortress in the Carolines.

Tarawa Atoll is located in the center of the Gilbert Islands and lies a few degrees north of the equator.

The atoll is made up of 25 small coral patches which form a reversed "L". These patches are connected by a coral reef passage which is dry at low tide. A characteristic underwater reef connects the extensions of this "L", completing the triangle and enclosing a lagoon. The lagoon is navigable to vessels of all sizes through a deep passage in the reef. (2)

Betio, the most important island of Tarawa Atoll, is located in the southwest corner at the left extension of the reversed "L". The island <sup>had been</sup> was headquarters for British officials and the Burns Phillips Trading Company maintained a radio station and warehouse there.

The shape of this island is dually described according to the observer's imagination, as a bird lying on its back (3), or as a ~~bird~~ <sup>both</sup> (4) both

(2) A-7, T-4, 24; (3) A-2; (4) A-1.

seem to be reasonably accurate.

A pier, known as the Burns Phillips Company Warf, juts out from the north center of the island some 1400 feet.

Betio is only 800 yards wide and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles in length. The width tapers down to a fraction on the eastern side. In comparison, the island is smaller than New York's Central Park. (5) The maximum elevation is 12 feet and the average is only 6. A few coconut trees were the islands only vegetation.

Tidal conditions in the area, later to become a most serious obstacle, provided a maximum depth of five and a half feet over the reef in Tarawa lagoon. At neap tide this depth recedes a foot or more. (6) A strong, south east wind might make it impossible to float standard landing craft.

#### HISTORY

It is interesting to note that Commodore John Wilkes, USN, made an oceanographic survey here in 1841 and over a hundred years later his charts were still being used. (7)

The Gilberts, mandated to the British for nearly fifty years, supported a population of 27,000 micronesian natives, 100 white and 40 Asiatics, besides civil authorities and missionaries. (8)

The islands fell to the conquering Japanese about January 1, 1942.

On 31 January 1942, the enemy realized our navy still existed when units of the U. S. Fleet made their initial raid in the area conducting a joint operation against the Gilberts and Marshalls. (9)

From 17-18 August 1942, Colonel Evans Carlson, in command of the Second Marine Raider Battalion, made a raid on Makin Island in the northern Gilberts. (10) This Battalion landed ashore in rubber boats from submarines, destroyed the island's military installations and killed the Japanese garrison force.

(5) A-1 Pg. 8; (6) A-1 Pg. 11; (7) A-2 Pg. 19; (8) A-2; (9) A-6;  
(10) A-6.

In October units of the fleet again struck in the Gilberts, but damage was negligible. Thereafter only minor actions occurred until November, 1943. (11)

#### ENEMY DEFENSES

During the twenty months subsequent to the Japanese occupation much had been done to fortify Betio Island. Many weapons, installations and troops to man these had sprouted up on Betio. A study of the defenses, not exactly as they were known prior to the landing by our forces, but from a joint military study after the operation, presents the following picture:

The Japanese organized the island for an all around defense. Beach defenses consisted of well emplaced and well sited weapons, various types of obstacles and mines. The weapons included grenades, mortars, rifles, light and heavy machine-guns, 13 mm. dual purpose machine-guns, 75 mm. dual purpose guns, 75 mm. mountain guns, 80 mm. anti-boat guns, 127 mm. twin mount dual purpose guns, and 8 inch Vickers coast defense guns in turrets. (12)

There were four of the latter type - two located on the southwest corner and two on the southeast coast. These were reported to have been captured from the British in the fall of Singapore. The obstacles included pyramidal, re-enforced concrete obstacles which were placed halfway around the island on the reef, an anti-boat barricade, made of coconut logs, double apron - barbed wire, a perimeter barricade constructed chiefly of coconut logs and anti-tank ditches, dug a short distance back of the barricade. (13) Appropriate fire control equipment included range finders, directors and searchlights. The weapons were emplaced in strongly constructed emplacements made of alternate layers of coconut logs, sand and re-enforced concrete. (14)

The enemy employed the 13 mm. (approximately .50 caliber) machine-guns as their basic beach defense weapon along the entire north coast and on both sides of the eastern tip. Along the western and southwestern coasts, the

(11) A-6; (12) A-5 Pg. 1-2; (13) A-5 Pg. 2; (14) A-5 Pg. 2.

7.7 mm. heavy machine-gun was the basic weapon. (15)

Air photos and submarine reconnaissance furnished the bulk of intelligence data available until D-day.

On this small coral patch in the Pacific, there existed an "alleged impregnable fortress." Rear Admiral Keifi Shibazki, commanding officer of Tarawa optimistic about his situation and fully prepared for the eventualities of an American landing, had told his Seventh Sasebo special Naval Landing Force, that a million men couldn't take the island.

#### INFORMATION, FRIENDLY FORCES

After a decision to invade the Gilbert Islands was reached, a plan was submitted for the simultaneous capture of Tarawa and Makin atolls and the subsequent occupation of Abemama to the south. (16)

The operation at Makin Island was to be carried out by the Northern Attack Force and the Tarawa operation by the Southern Attack Force.

Task Force 52 would operate with the Northern Force and Task Force 53 with the Southern Force. The strongest support groups were allotted to the Southern Force.

The naval support group contained 3 old battleships, 3 heavy cruisers, 3 light cruisers, 5 escort carriers and 21 destroyers. These ships were expected to fire some 25,000 rounds, ranging from 5-16 inches in caliber. (17)

Approximately 131 land-based and 366 carrier-based aircraft of all types were available to support both forces. (18)

The amphibious forces were commanded by Rear Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, USN.

The Amphibious Corps commanded by Major General Holland M. Smith, USMC, consisted of two landing forces.

(15) A-5 Pg. 2; (16) A-7 Chap. 1; (17) A-7 Chap. 1, Pg. 1-2; (18) A-7 Chap. 2, Pg. 2.

The Northern force was one regimental combat team from the Twenty-seventh Division (U S Army) commanded by Major General Ralph Smith, USA. The Southern Landing Force consisted of two regimental combat teams from the ~~Second Marine Division~~, commanded by Major General Julian C. Smith, USMC. Both forces were heavily re-enforced by supporting units. Corps reserve was constituted from the remaining combat team in the Second Division - the Sixth Marine Regiment. Abemama was to be reconnoitered by a platoon of the Corps Reconnaissance Battalion operating from a submarine.

#### THE SECOND MARINE DIVISION

The Second Marine Division was a veteran division from the Guadalcanal Campaign where its regiments had been committed in separate operations. Its 2nd Regiment had been cited by the President while attached to the First Marine Division. The Division was formed in Southern California in early 1941 from the 2nd Brigade.

After the Guadalcanal Campaign the division went to New Zealand for rest, reorganization and to aid in security of that nation. Brigadier General Leo D. Hermle, USMC, was the Assistant Division Commander and Colonel Merrit Edson, the Chief of Staff. The Division consisted of three identical infantry regiments, the 2nd, 6th and 8th Marines, plus the 10th (Artillery), 18th (Engineers), the 2nd Tank Battalion, special troops and attached supporting units. The infantry regiments were designated Combat Teams, 2, 6, and 8 respectively, while the three battalions of each regiment were designated Landing Teams 1, 2 and 3. The regimental number was used in each case after the battalion number to identify. Example: L.T. 1, 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines.

CT-2 with LT2/8 attached was given the assault role for the landings on Betio Island. Colonel David Shoup was the combat teams commanding officer. Colonel Maurice Holmes commanded CT-6 and CP-8 was commanded by Colonel Elmer Hall.

The capture of Betio Island called for the following plans:

At H-Hour on D-Day CT-2 would land on the northern Red Beaches with three landing teams abreast and one in reserve. Red Beach 1 on the western most (right) flank was assigned to LT 3/2. Extending east from this beach to the pier and in the center of the landing area Red Beach 2 was given to LT 2/2 commanded by Lt. Colonel Herbert R. Amey. From the left side of the pier to a position approximately across from the east end of the airstrip was Red Beach 3, the landing area of LT 2/8, commanded by Major Henry P. Crowe.

The plan envisaged a fast assault and early seizure of the airstrip. Assault troops were then to move quickly across the island to the southern Black Beaches. After this phase, the flanks would be pushed out and secured on the east and west. LT <sup>1/2</sup>~~2~~, in reserve, would then pass through the lines of LT 2/8 at a position just east of the airstrip, taxi-turn and pick up the attack to the southeast down the narrow tail of Betio. The Regimental Scout Sniper Platoon had been given the mission of securing the 1400 foot pier, prior to the main landings.

#### PRELUDE TO THE BATTLE

The Second Division embarked on the transports in Wellington, New Zealand Harbor and during the early morning hours of 1 November the convoy slipped quietly out to sea. In a few hours marines from another division would be landing on Bouganville Island.

Security had been a problem around the capital city of Wellington and for this reason information was not disseminated below command and staff levels on the nature and location of the target area prior to sailing. However, increased activity clearly indicated that the division was leaving New Zealand.

It would be necessary in this operation to move the garrison forces in closely behind the assault, despite the disadvantage, because shipping was needed for future pending operations.

Because the possibility of encountering treacherous tidal conditions in the target area was inherent, experiments had been conducted by the attached Amphibious Tractor Battalion using LVT's to land troops in the assault. ~~This was the first time~~ these vehicles, primarily used as cargo-carriers, would be used in such a role.

The experiment progressed satisfactorily and the plan was adopted. LVT's however, were not available in sufficient numbers and as a result only the first three waves were to be boated thus.

A dress rehearsal was held at Efate and part of the attack force warships joined the convoy at that place. The rehearsal was conducted in a satisfactory manner and the convoy again got underway to commence the long zig-zagging course into the Central Pacific.

On 14 November Admiral Harry Hill, the southern force commander, released the following message to all ships in the convoy. "Give all hands the general picture of the projected operation and further details to all who should have this in the execution of their duties." (19)

While the convoy steamed toward the Gilberts, the supporting air and surface craft of the attack force were softening up the area in anticipation of the coming assault. Aerial blows were struck throughout the Gilberts and Marshalls by 7th Airforce and carrier-based planes to destroy the enemy's air strength and prevent him from re-enforcing the target area. On D-4 days Army Liberators heavily bombed Tarawa and D-2 saw a large carrier force join in the assault. Cruisers commenced a shelling that lasted throughout D-1 day. Nauru, Jaluit and Mili were subjected to a sharp D-day bombing. Battleships and aircraft, in an alternate four hour coordinated bombardment, commenced the early morning preparation on Betio Island. Three thousand tons of high explosives were to be expended on this tiny island in these preparatory fires. (20)

Pilots flying over Betio received only weak and inaccurate anti-aircraft fire and consistently reported that the island appeared to be entirely deserted. It was believed that the enemy might have evacuated the island and consequently optimism ran high among our naval commanders.

#### D-DAY

At 0345 on Saturday 20 November, the transports arrived in the transport area. The ships lying to began to lower away landing craft as preparations got underway for disembarking troops.

About 0500 a Japanese blinkerlight demanded a recognition signal. Receiving no answer the enemy opened fire on the transport area with long range 8 inch rifles and shells began falling heavily around the transport area. (21)

The USS Maryland commenced counter-battery fire and two other battleships joined in. In twenty minutes the enemy guns ceased firing. Our carrier planes although due, had not arrived on station at this time.

Japanese guns again took the transport area under fire shortly after 0530. The first three waves were already in the water when the transport commander ordered the ships back out of the shelled area. Chances which might result in the loss of a landing team could not be taken. Small boats in the water had only the alternative of following their ships out of the danger area until the enemy guns could be eliminated. Warships covered the withdrawal.

At 0613 the aerial bombardment commenced and at 0622 warships resumed the attack with the smaller vessels moving in as close as 2000 yards. (22)

The morning which had earlier presented a picture of Pacific tranquility was now converted into a terrific crescendo of mounting fury. Exploding fuel and ammunition dumps on Betio resembled an inferno.

At 0658 scheduled firing ceased and individual ships commenced fires

(21) A-6, (22) A-1 Pg. 30.

against targets of opportunity. (23)

One mine sweeper entered the lagoon at 0700 and the enemy immediately brought it under fire as two of our destroyers went to her aid. The captain of the sweeper reported that a strong wind from the south would make smoke laying operations unfavorable and this plan had to be dropped.

At 0820 General Smith sent a message stating that H-Hour would be delayed 10 minutes. (24) The first three waves left the rendezvous area on time but a combination of wind, sea, ebb tide, the poor mechanical condition of some LVT'S and overloading, had slowed the expected speed of 3 knots to 2½ knots. The troops consequently arrived at the Line of Departure 39 minutes late. H-Hour was finally set at 0900. (25)

At 0830 a boat containing Lieutenant William D. Hawkins and his Regimental Scout Snipers left the Line of Departure to accomplish the mission of seizing the 1400 foot pier. This platoon reached the pier ramp at 0855 and Lieutenant Hawkins, Lieutenant Leslie and four men disembarked under sniper fire. (26) The remainder of this platoon was ordered in as machine-gun and mortar fire commenced from the island. A landing could not be made on the ramp end into this fire and an attempt was made to gain the pier alongside. This resulted in the boat being grounded offshore. The boat retracted to await the arrival of an LVT. Lieutenant Hawkins was at this time engaged with an enemy machine-gun emplacement. (27) For these and later exploits Lieutenant Hawkins was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor and the airfield was given his name.

The first wave left the Line of Departure at 0822 and reported that they were receiving heavy fire from 40 mm. guns on the course to the beaches. The first elements reached the beach with relatively light casualties, but as supporting fires lifted, there was a sharp increase in enemy fire on the landing approaches.

(23) A-1 Pg. 30; (24) A-1 Pg. 32; (25) A-7; (26) A-1 Pg. 34; (27) A-1 Pg. 34.

LT 2/8 landed on Red Beach 3 at 0910 and the commanding officer reported "heavy opposition." LT 2/2 landing on Red 2 reported "heavy resistance." Lieutenant Colonel Amey, commanding this landing team, was killed as he landed.

LT 3/2 arrived on Red 1 at 0917 and messaged, "Boats held up on reef right flank Red 1; troops in the water receiving heavy fire." (28)

Betio's beaches were less than ten feet wide in many places and were faced by a heavy four foot barricade. A continuous curtain of machine-gun fire grazed over this wall to meet the troops attempting to negotiate it.

Strong southeast winds had partially bared the coral reef off shore and LCVP's of the 4th wave, hung up on this reef 500 to 700 yards offshore, were under heavy fire from 37 mm. and 40 mm. guns. Troops wading in, gradually exposing more of their bodies as they neared the shore, were taking heavy casualties. Later it was estimated that as many as 400 men died in this bloody phase. Direct hits caused many casualties in the landing craft.

Troops pinned down on the narrow beaches were striving to move inland in small groups to escape the enemy machine-gun and mortar fire.

LVT's were immediately put into a shuttle service, carrying wounded out and bringing in the LCVP complement.

At 1000 elements of LT 2/8 had pushed inland to the airfield taxi-strip on the left flank and reported "tough resistance." LT 2/2 in the center reported its situation as "grave." 81 mm. mortars from the heavy weapons companies were rendering support but many of these had to take positions in the open or seek positions in shell holes as the island provided little defilade.

Colonel Shoup and the CP group landed on the pier under fire at 1030. (29), and set up temporary headquarters. He found the combat team badly disorganized and immediately took steps to remedy this unfavorable condition.

(28) A-1 Pg. 44; (29) A-1 Pg. 55.

LT 1/2 commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Wood B. Kyle, was ordered to land on Red 2 immediately. This unit had been ordered earlier to hold off landing as the situation was not clear. The Commanding General ordered Colonel Shoup to take control of all units landing, as well as his own team.

At 1100 a message was sent to the Commanding General requesting LT 3/8 to land on Red 3, to cut across at the junction of Red 2 and 3 and support the weak left flank of LT 2/2. LT 3/8 commenced landing under terrific small arms and mortar fire and reported that it was suffering heavy casualties.

Lieutenant Colonel Irvine Jordan, an observer from the Fourth Marine Division who had temporarily assumed command of 2/2, again reported that battalions situation as very bad and requested half-tracks for support. At 1205 A and B Companies of LT 1/2 landed on Red 2 and gave direct support to this battalion in an effective manner.

The remnants of LT 3/8, after landing on Red 3, was absorbed into LT 2/8 under Major Crowe. Similarly, control of the hard-hit 2/2 later passed to Lieutenant Colonel Kyle.

LT 3/2, hard-pressed on Red 1 sent a message at noon reporting large caliber guns on the west coast and requested air support. (30)

At this same time the CP, CT-2 moved behind an enemy air raid shelter just off Red Beach 2.

Afternoon came with the situation on all beaches still remaining critical. Reserve teams could not land as the enemy wall of protective fires grew in intensity. M-4 tanks however, had begun to land and at 1400 all of these vehicles from C Company 2nd Tank Battalion had reported ashore with the exception of one.

Colonel Shoup then ordered Landing Teams 1/2 and 2/2 to attack inland and enlarge the beachhead. This was definitely not a beachhead in the

sense the manual describes.

Wrecked LVT's, boats and many Japanese craft now littered the landing area. Countless dead lay on the beaches and its approaches. By mid-afternoon of D-Day the issue was still in doubt.

Our tanks were effective in cutting through to the airstrip and their use bolstered the troops morale. Several of these vehicles were knocked out in the ensuing actions, but the work done by each was invaluable. One made a raid across the island knocking out two enemy guns and destroying five pillboxes. It received eighteen hits in this action before succumbing to fire. Another received a freak hit by a Japanese 37 mm. projectile directly down its 75 mm. tube. The tank continued in action using the 30 caliber machine guns.

Late in the afternoon on D-Day the Corps Commander ordered CT-6 (Corps Reserve) to be released to the Commanding General, Second Marine Division. The Commanding General, in turn, ordered the Division Reconnaissance Company to land one platoon each in rubber boats on Buita and Eita Islands prior to midnight, and conduct a reconnaissance. In doing this, General Smith hoped to clarify the situation on those islands before committing CT-6 prematurely on Betio Island. The order was not received by the reconnaissance company until after midnight and this mission was not carried out according to plan.

Progress during the afternoon was slow and costly with the beachhead expanding slightly to the east, west and north. Colonel Shoup was ordered to consolidate his holdings, dig in and prepare for a night counter attack. Casualty reports only fragmentary, indicated high losses during the day's fighting.

A message to the Commanding General gave the following picture of the situation at night fall: (See Situation map.)

"LT 2/8 holds left flank to center of Red 3." (only up to 30 yards inland in some places, with forward elements across airstrip taxi.)

"LT's 1/2 and 2/2 have Red 2." (50 to 150 yards inland.) The situation of LT 3/2 was not clarified. (31)

As darkness fell, five sections from the First Battalion, Tenth Marines equipped with 75 mm. pack howitzers were ordered in to Red Beach 2. This Battalion had been attached to CT-2. Two sections had transferred to LVT's and through a misunderstanding it was believed the remaining three were also boated thus. These sections dragged part of their guns onto the ramp under fire, while others were broken down and carried ashore. The pack howitzers were initially used in direct fire missions. (32)

Throughout the night, boats infiltrated to the beaches bringing in a few much needed supplies.

The anticipated enemy counter-attack did not materialize during the night - probably due to the fact that the enemy had little or no communications system left. Fires burned throughout the night, grotesquely illuminating Betio Island.

General Smith ordered an attack at dawn and notified Colonel Shoup that LT 1/8 would commence landing at 0600.

#### D+1 DAY

The first waves of LT 1/8 started ashore under the same devastating fire that marked D-Day. Incessant machine-gun fire was coming from the hulk of the Seida Maru a half-sunken Japanese tramp steamer lying off shore. This infiltrating fire was causing many casualties among the landing team. An airstrike was quickly placed on this ship which had been occupied by infiltrating enemy troops under cover of darkness. Bombing, in this case, was highly inaccurate as the machine-guns continued to fire and our casualties grew heavier. This vessel was finally taken under fire by destroyers and the enemy guns silenced. Enemy mortars and anti-boat guns were still laying effective fire on our troops as Colonel Hall, the commanding officer of CT-6,

held off later waves, stating it was impossible to land equipment and vehicles in the face of such fire. (33)

Throughout the day, carrier planes gave support, bombing and strafing enemy installations. Destroyers rendered invaluable support with their 5 inch guns. Air, ground and naval gun fire liaison parties performed outstanding services during these missions. Close support was a problem and in many cases impossible due to the fact that small scattered groups of our infantry were cleaning out pockets of enemy resistance.

Water and ammunition was running low and urgent requests were made for these items.

Strong pockets of enemy held out near Red Beaches 1 and 2 and every effort was made to eliminate these. Lieutenant Hawkins and his scout-sniper platoon were engaged in this area in a series of sharp actions against enemy pillboxes. This officer leading two sections, had already knocked out three such emplacements by 0830. Although he had been previously wounded, Lieutenant Hawkins, working with tanks, continued his outstanding accomplishments until he fell mortally wounded.

Forward elements of the division had advanced across the airstrip against strong resistance and by 1100 were attacking into the positions on the north edge of the runway in an effort to carry out Colonel Shoup's orders to occupy the north and west sectors of the island.

The situation was still precarious at noon and a decision was made to commit part of CT-6, now constituting division reserve.

During the afternoon, the night flank supported by mortars, tanks and aircraft broke through the enemy's defenses and captured Green Beach on the west coast. This advantage was quickly followed by landing a battalion from CT-6 on this relatively clear beach. Another landing team from that regiment was ordered to land on Bairiki Island, a few miles to the east, to prevent

the enemy withdrawing from Betic.

The remainder of the First Battalion, Tenth Marines reported ashore that afternoon to support the attack.

This particular time is described by various histories as the turning point of the battle and that night the situation was more favorable.

It is difficult to describe the troop disposition as dug in on the night of D+1 day because many areas were lightly held, and in some places made up of composite troops from different landing teams. Generally the western end of the island was held up to 200 yards inland by LT 3/2 and LT 1/6 which had just landed. LT 1/2 was disposed along the southern Black Beaches across the center of the airstrip.

In some places the enemy still held strong positions along the Black Beaches. Remnants of LT 2/2 were scattered between LT 1/2 and LT 3/2 westward. The pocket at the junction of Red 1 and Red 2 still held out. CT-8 held a line east of the pier extending across the island to tie in with LT 1/2. Many Japanese who had fallen back from the Red Beaches had occupied the large, strongly constructed shelters and command post around the airfield. These had not been constructed into organized positions, but their heavy, re-enforced walls provided a maximum of protection to the defender.

The shore party had started supplies rolling over the beaches and by nightfall, ammunition, water and rations were arriving in some quantity. Dumps were built despite constant sniper and mortar fire in the area around the pier. Reserve half-tracks were landed to assist in support of the operation.

#### D+2 DAYS

The plan for the third day called for LT 1/8 to swing west and clear the area along the western half of the airstrip. The remainder of CT-8 was to pivot eastward and secure to the eastern end of the airstrip. CT-2 would continue to hold what it had and limit operations to mopping up their area.

LT 1/6 commanded by Major William Jones, was ordered to attack east from Green Beach along the south shores, pass through LT 1/2 and attack on a narrow front to the eastern end of the airstrip.

The attack jumped off at daylight and was marked by hard fighting along the southern beaches. The rifle and grenade supported by tanks and half-tracks moved against stubborn resistance. Flame throwers played a big part in the elimination of pillboxes. Tanks moved within a few yards of the enemy and fired into the apertures. Fanatical enemy charged these weapons and one such Japanese was ground beneath the treads attempting to place a grenade underneath.

At 0800 LT 3/6 was ordered to land on Green Beach to re-enforce the present lines ashore. (34)

LT 1/6 in a column of companies, continued the attack. Progress was difficult but the mission was slowly being accomplished. Destroyers moved in close and maintained a constant shelling against the strong concrete installations on the southeast end of the island as our aircraft continued to bomb and strafe that area.

The Commanding General, Second Marine Division, arrived ashore and set up headquarters at the command post of CT-2. At 1600 the General sent a message to the Corps Commander reporting progress slow, costly and resistance strong, further stating that the situation was not favorable for a rapid clean-up of Betio Island. (35)

LT's 2/6 and 3/6 reached their objective by mid-afternoon, but the pocket of enemy still held out at the junction of Red Beaches 1 and 2. About 1900 LT 1/6 reached its objective and made contact with elements of CT-8.

Defensive positions were prepared by LT 1/6 with the following dispositions: B Company on the right, A Company in the center and C Company on the left.

CT-8 and LT 3/6 occupied reserve positions in rear of the line.

That night Japanese troops infiltrated into the line and activity to the

front indicated a general counter-attack. The infiltration was well organized and caused some casualties. A wedge was driven between A and B Companies with B receiving the weight of the attack. Artillery laid down heavy concentrations in the enemy assembly areas using time fire. At this time naval gun fire was called for. The Company Commander was ordered to hold at all cost. The enemy was evidently attempting to make our troops disclose their positions. The attack at 2300 was repulsed with great loss to the enemy. Again at 0400 the Japanese launched a typical banzai attack, waving swords, screaming and throwing grenades. A feint was made opposite the left flank and the attack launched against the right. Our supporting mortars, artillery and destroyers again laid down strong concentrations as fire was brought in as close as 50 yards in front of our lines. A close quarter struggle ensued and the attack was again repulsed. It is estimated that 300 to 400 of the enemy were killed in these actions. This marked the last of Japanese organized resistance on the island.

#### D+3 DAYS

That morning LT 3/6 commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth F. McCleod, replacing 1/6 on the line was initiated in the attack. Mortars, artillery and destroyers again opened up their preparatory fires and the attack jumped off at 0800. This battalion pinched off its units as the island gradually narrowed. Enemy morale broke under the constant shelling from destroyers firing at point-blank range with 5 inch and 40 mm. rapid-fire guns. Some of the enemy committed hara-kari by holding grenades against their bodies.

Our troops reached the end of the island and 450 Japanese dead were counted in the LT 3/6 zone of action. Meanwhile LT 1/8 attacking furiously against the enemy positions at the junction of Red Beaches 1 and 2, broke that resistance and completed their mop-up of the area.

At 1512 General Julian Smith declared the battle was over and the island

secured. This ended the battle of Saipan Island. From Atoll, 73 hours after

after H-Hour. (36)

The British Union Jack, furnished by the British Resident Commissioner was run up alongside the American Ensign in a brief ceremony.

The following day carrier-based planes from the United States Fleet landed on Hawkins Field. On the fifth day the assault troops re-embarked aboard the transports, bound for Hawaii and a well-earned rest.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Marine Corps casualties in this operation totaled 3,100. Over 1000 of these were killed in action. Various compiled estimates of the enemy's casualties (all dead) range in the neighborhood of 5000. Four hundred Korean prisoners, forced into labor by the Japanese, were taken into custody.

Our heavy casualties were caused mainly because a freak tide had exposed our troops to terrific fire from all types of enemy weapons, and the Japanese defenses encountered were unusually strong.

Thousands of dead bodies exposed to the hot, tropical sun, littered the island. Interment presented a serious problem, initially, because combat troops could not be spared for burial details.

The Japanese characteristic of tenacity was well illustrated in this battle. Once trapped, the enemy, rather than die at the hands of the attacker or ignominiously surrender, would commit suicide. This was accomplished in several instances by placing the big Toe on the trigger. Many bodies were found in that described position.

An after battle-tour of the island proved the quality of the Japanese defenses. Betio was ringed with approximately five hundred positions. Pill-boxes were built with two or more compartments and organized into mutually supporting positions. Command post, block-houses and shelters with walls or re-enforced concrete up to 6 feet thick withstood the heaviest bombardment. The largest of these withstood constant shelling for three days.

Steel cupola command posts spaced at intervals around the island controlled the beach defenses.

In analyzing this operation it is most evident that it was one of many difficulties. It was the first operation involving the capture of a well defended atoll. This is similar to an attack against a fortified position with the added difficulty of initiating the attack in a ship-to-shore movement, plus the possibility of encountering many natural as well as man-made obstacles.

A coordinated enemy defense continued to function long after the landings and the enemy had the ability to place effective fire in any area, at will.

The plan for the capture of Betio was based on sound tactical decisions and the attack, despite early set backs, was conducted in a determined and efficient manner.

The battle proved a rigid testing ground for our weapons and marked their effectiveness against defenses of this type. The flame thrower proved itself an excellent weapon for eliminating pillboxes. The medium tank in a mutually supporting role with infantry was invaluable.

Small unit leadership, which is highly stressed in the Marine Corps, paid handsome dividends in this battle. Officers and non-coms alike displayed courage, determination and intelligence when the situation was most doubtful. The private, on many occasions through his initiative, proved himself worthy non-com material.

On countless occasions, individuals had the determination and ability to weld badly disorganized groups of men into fighting units and then to inspire and lead these men.

A combination of these qualities and a high "esprit-de-corps" won the battle of Betio Island.

From the above analysis and the foregoing description of the operation the following criticisms are known:

The preparation of Betio Island for occupation by our troops was not sufficient to neutralize the threat.

Due to the changes in H-Hour, cover and protection for the troops to the beach was not given as closely as it might have been. For a period of about 15 minutes prior to landing, no close support was rendered. This may have given the enemy time to recover from the bombardment.

On too many occasions bombing was inaccurate and did little damage.

Naval gunfire though it did more damage, could not be used to full advantage. The island with very little elevation provided a flat target. If ships moved to extreme ranges to get the better effect of a large angle of fall, the target was obscured to observation. At close ranges the flat trajectory and high velocity resulted in many misses due to slight elevation changes. (37)

After the failure of the assault troops to secure the beachhead in the time expected, there were many idle boats containing equipment that could not be used ashore congesting the landing areas.

A great need existed for an officer familiar with the situation ashore to be present in the control vessel. This vessel, the heart of the supply system and a logistical control center in the ship-to-shore movement insures the timely arrival of reserves and supplies.

Equipment, though waterproofed to withstand normal landing conditions, did not stand up under prolonged exposure. It is felt that extensive tests should have been made to improve the waterproofing process.

#### LESSONS LEARNED

This operation set a pattern for future conquests of a similar nature. It established certain methods and laid down certain requirements to insure success.

It also provided a means to prove the weapons best suited to accomplish the mission and the proper manner to employ these weapons.

Many of the lessons learned clearly illustrates the teachings of our

military doctrines and principles of the attack. In many cases these principles were strictly adhered to. In some cases for certain reasons they were not. Some of the lessons give requirements for an operation of this type. They are shown in the following outline.

1. Planning requires early detailed information on the target area regarding location, type, strength and nature of the enemy's defenses.
2. Adequate maps, charts and aerial photographs must be made available.
3. Reconnaissance must be a continuous process. Late information should be disseminated to lower echelons in time to be of value.
4. Weather and hydrographic conditions play an important part in planning an amphibious operation and it is necessary such information <sup>C</sup>quired be made available.
5. Adequate security measures must be taken to prevent "information leaks."
6. Orders must be detailed but kept clear and concise.
7. Instructions to subordinate commanders should be issued early, in order that these commanders may complete their preparations.
8. Training should be stressed down to the smallest units and every man must be well indoctrinated.
9. When possible problems should be conducted with conditions similar to those expected to be encountered.
10. Dummy emplacements should be constructed and live ammunition used.
11. If available, supporting aircraft, warships and artillery should be used in training, in order that troops may learn the capabilities and limitations of these weapons.
12. Training in the removal of mines and obstacles should be stressed.
13. The assault should be vigorous, aggressive and whenever possible the element of surprise maintained.
14. The arrival of supports and reserves must be timely.
15. Reconnaissance should be ~~maximized~~ as soon as possible, after the

beach assault is completed.

16. Preparatory bombardment must be prolonged and intense.

17. ~~During the landing phase, troops must be assured adequate cover and~~  
protection.

18. Complete coordination between troops and supporting arms is essential.

19. All supporting weapons must be used to full advantage.

20. Supporting weapons and ammunition must be of a type suitable to get the desired effect on the target.

21. The supply plan requires flexibility and it must be concurrent with the tactical plan.

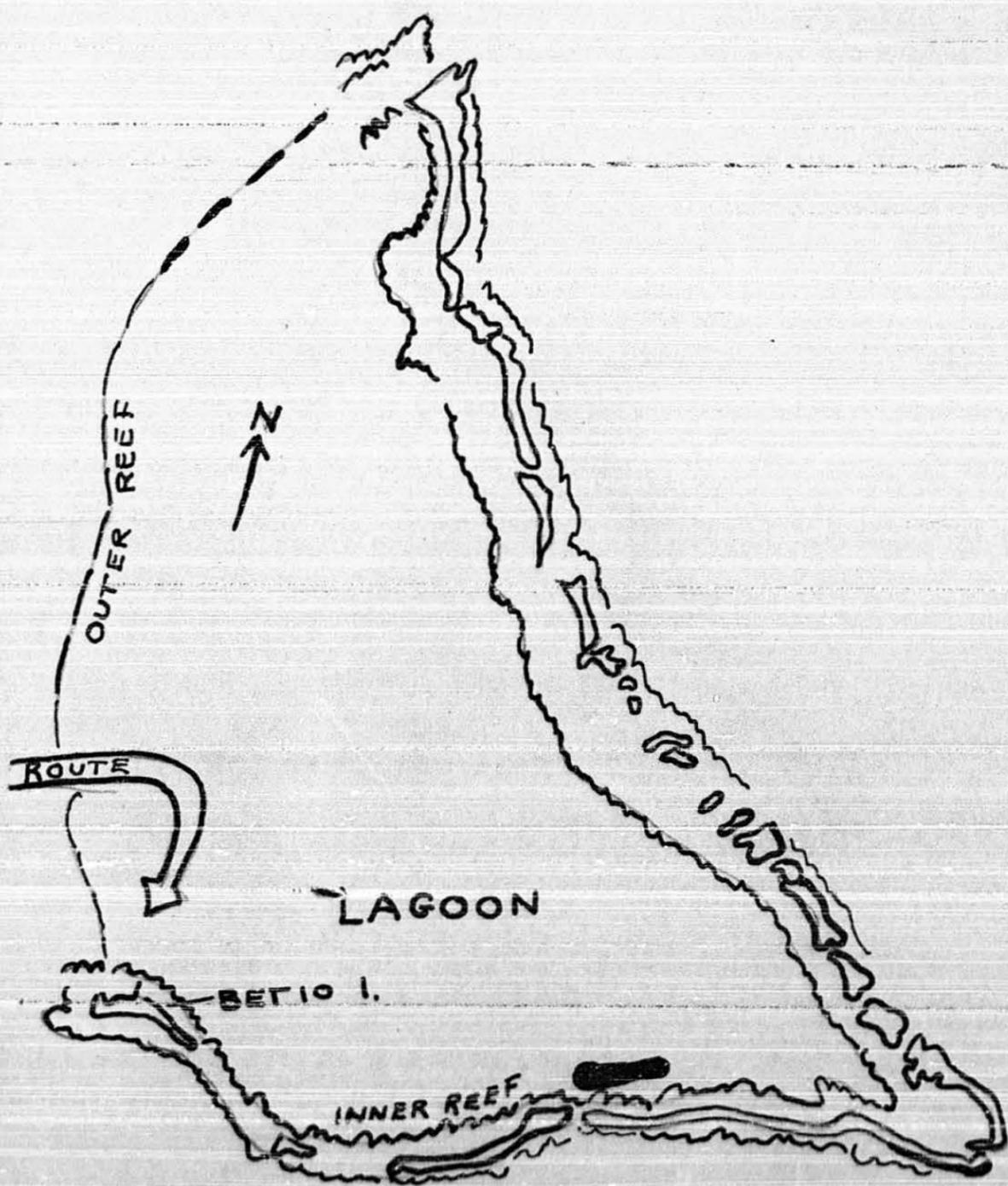
22. Logistical control must assure the early arrival of supplies on the beaches, in the order that they are needed.

23. Landing craft such as LVT's, LVT(A)4's and Duwks must be available in adequate numbers and special equipment sufficient to meet the needs of amphibious troops.

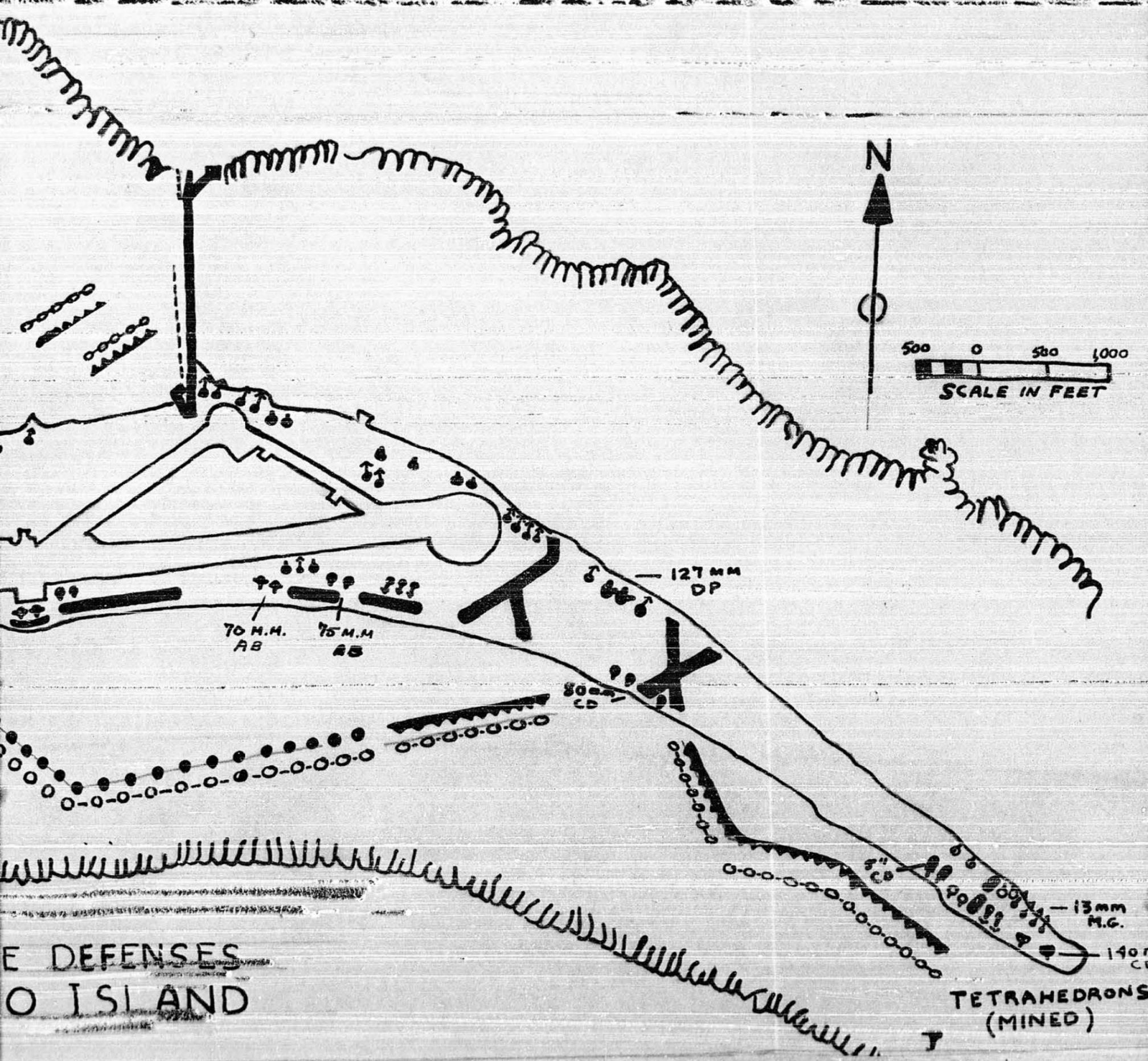
24. It is necessary that the shore party function as early as the tactical situation permits.

25. Hospital ships, or other vessels designated as such, should be available in the immediate area to insure adequate and close medical support.

26. Communications must be adequate and they must be suitable to pass information to adjacent units, as well as higher and lower echelons.

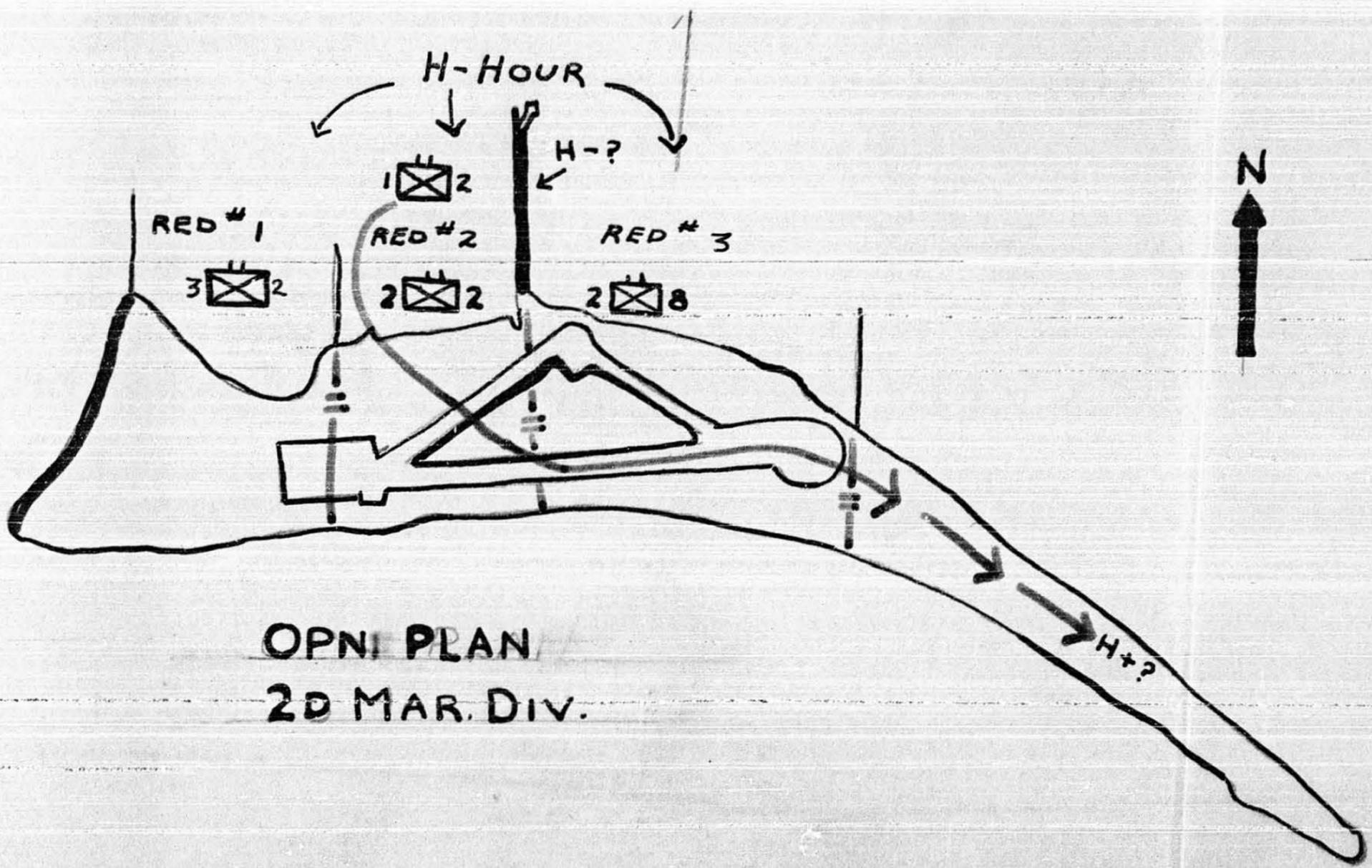


TAKAWA ATOLL

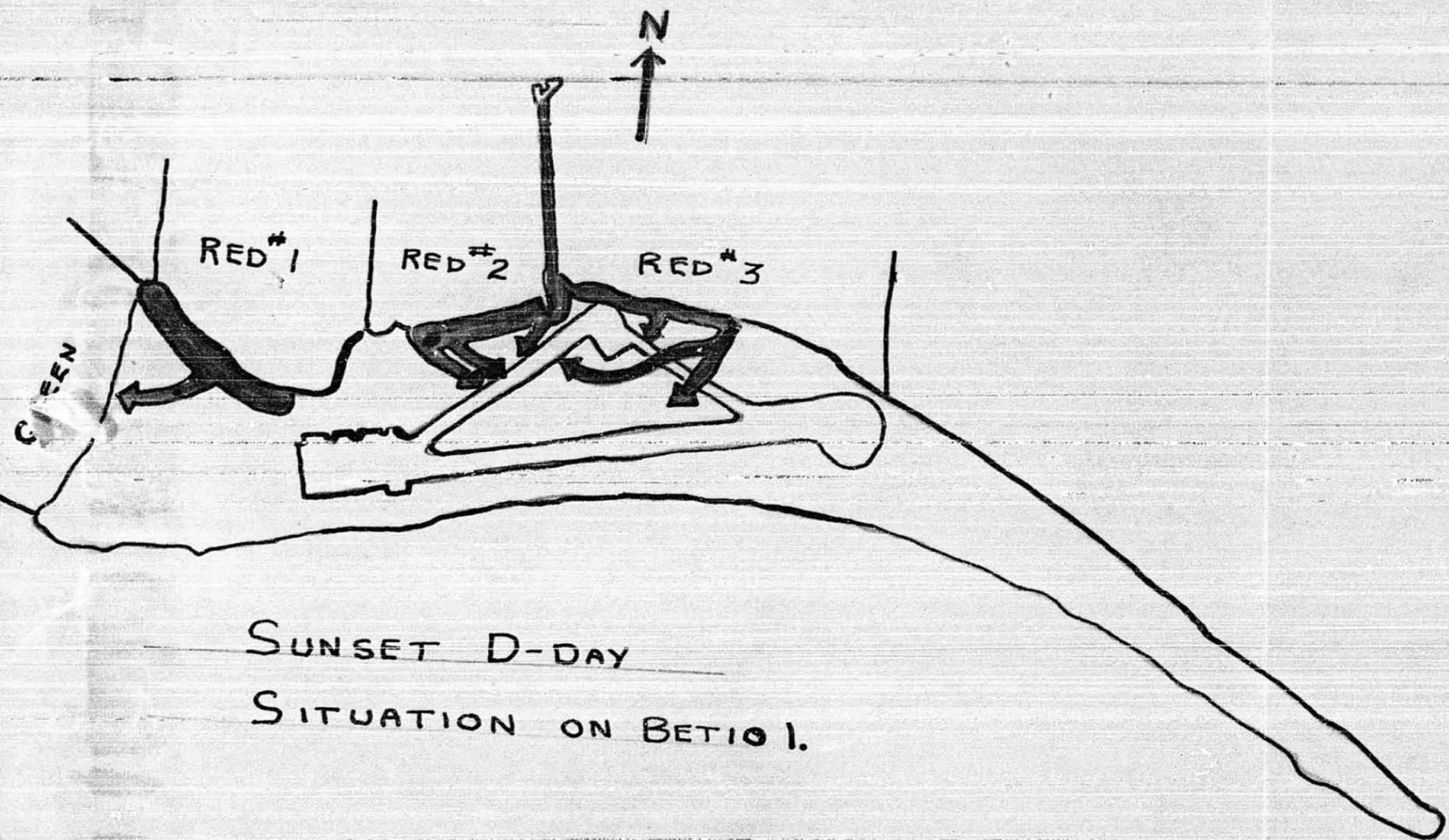


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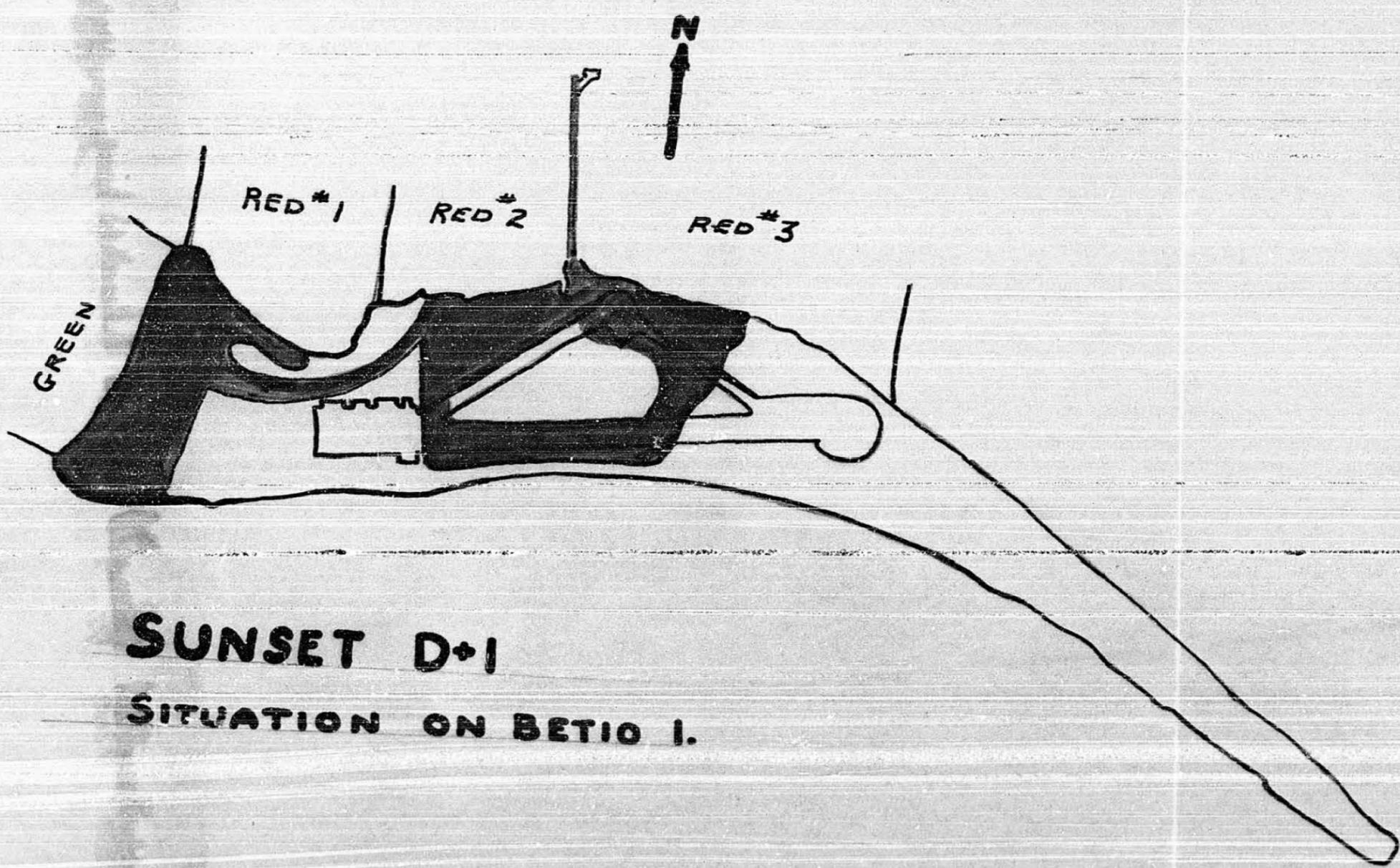
TETRAHEDRONS  
(MINED)



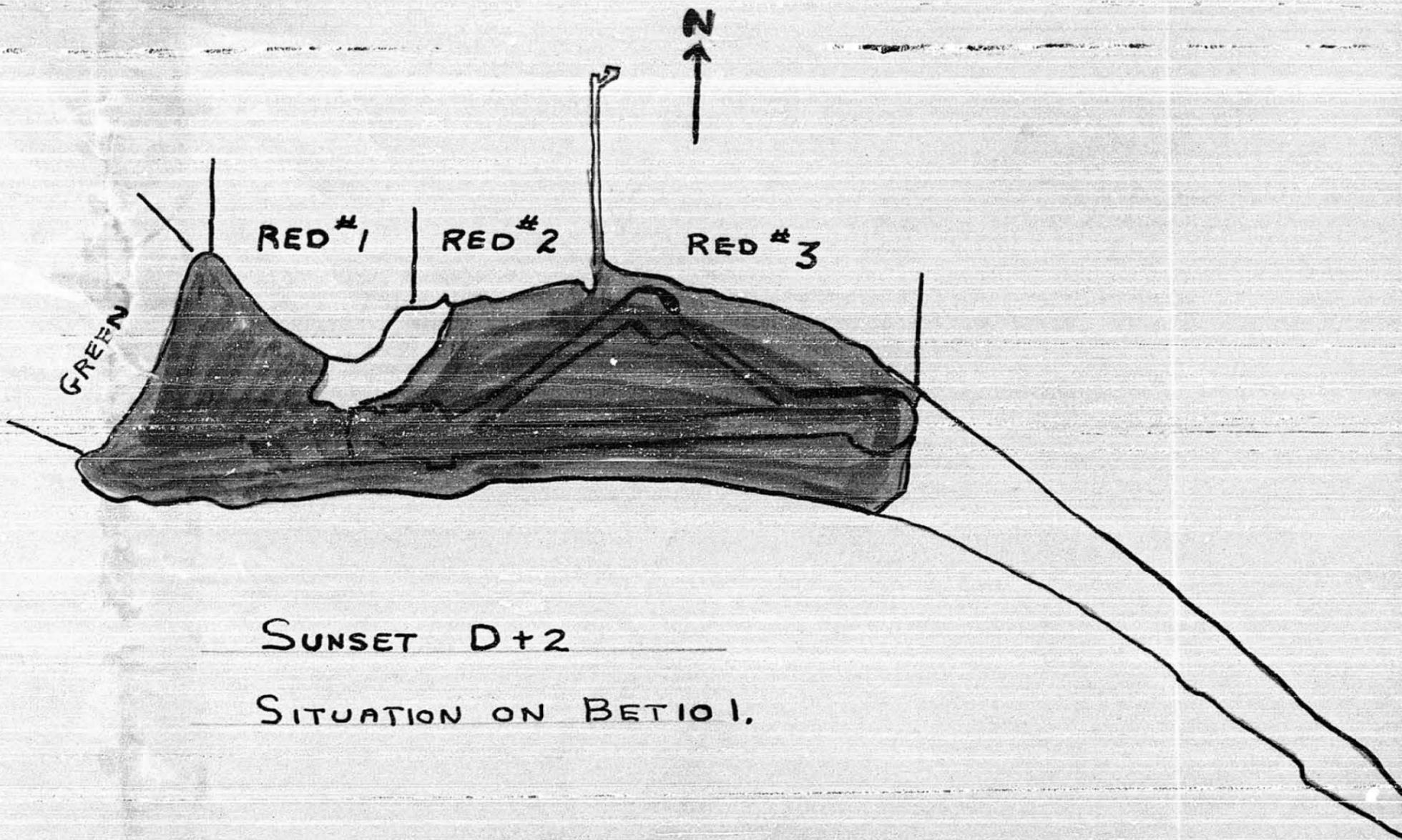
OPNI PLAN  
 2D MAR. DIV.



SUNSET D-DAY  
SITUATION ON BETIO I.



**SUNSET D+1**  
**SITUATION ON BETIO I.**



SUNSET D+2

SITUATION ON BETIO I.

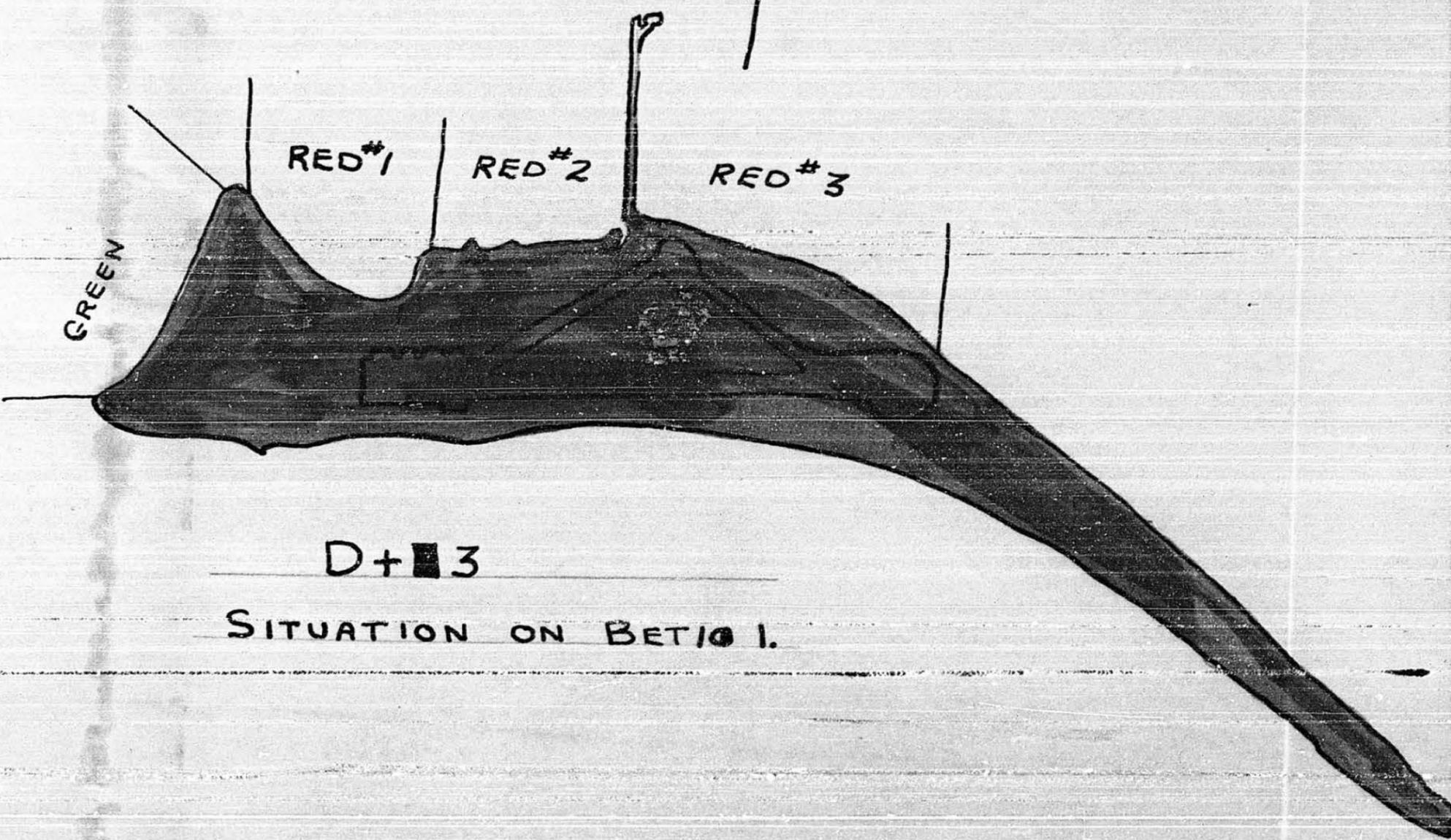
N  
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GREEN

RED#1

RED#2

RED#3



D+ 3

SITUATION ON BETIO I.