

ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS COURSE

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 382D INFANTRY (96TH
INFANTRY DIVISION) IN THE PENETRATION OF
THE JAPANESE NAHA-SHURI-YONABARU LINE, ON
OKINAWA, 10 MAY TO 31 MAY 1945
(RYUKUS CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

Type of operation described: REGIMENT IN ATTACK

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO I

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INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 382d Infantry, 96th US Division in the penetration of the Japanese Naha-Shuri-Yonabaru line, 10 May to 31 May 1945. A brief description of events leading to the action is included to familiarize the reader with the situation and conditions as they existed at the time of these operations.

During the year 1944 and the early part of 1945, a series of brilliant land and sea victories brought our fast moving Armed Forces well on their way to driving the Japanese back into the bailiwick from which they had launched their infamous attack on the peace-loving peoples of the Pacific. The time was ripe for preparing the attack against the very heart of this treacherous enemy - the Japanese homeland. (1) The Joint Chiefs of Staff therefore directed the Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Area to occupy one or more positions in the Ryukus Islands. (2)

The reasons for the occupation of these islands as stated in the directive were as follows:

1. "To establish bases from which to:
 - a. attack the main Islands of Japan and their sea approaches with Naval and Air Forces;
 - b. support further operations in the region bordering on the East China Sea;
 - c. sever Japanese sea and air communications between the EMPIRE and the Netherlands East Indies.

(1) A-8, p.355; (2) A-1, p. 1-0-1

2. To establish secure sea and air communications through the East China Sea to the coast of China and the Yangtze Valley.
3. To maintain unremitting military pressure against Japan." (See Map A) (3)

In the accomplishment of the directive as outlined, the Tenth Army, commanded by General Simon Bolivar Buckner, was assigned the mission of assisting in the capture, occupation, defense and development of Okinawa Island, and the establishment of control of the sea and air in the Ryukus area, with the eventual aim of extending control over the entire Ryukus by capturing, defending and developing additional positions. (4)

The Tenth Army operational plan included the Okinawa landing on L-Day (1 April 1945) with two Corps abreast. The III Amphibious Corps was to land on the left, drive rapidly inland, turn north and block off that portion of the Island. Simultaneously, the XXIV Army Corps would land on the right, drive rapidly inland cutting the Island in two, then turn south to capture that portion of the Island. (See Map B) (5)

The landings were almost without opposition. The Japanese failed to man their elaborately prepared positions covering the entire landing beaches. The coral reefs which surrounded the landing beaches apparently led the Japanese to believe that no major assault forces could be landed across them, and to commit that often-repeated error in the history of defeated armies - too much faith in an obstacle. (3) A-1, p. 1-0-1; (4) A-1, p. 1-0-2; (5) A-1, p. 7-I-1

This false sense of security cost the Japanese his golden opportunity to inflict heavy losses on the American forces while crossing the exceedingly vulnerable beaches. (6)

By L plus 4 the XXIV Army Corps had advanced to or beyond a line which had been designated in the plan as the "L plus 10 line". (See Map C) (7) The III Amphibious Corps in the first few days accomplished their mission and secured the entire northern part of the Island with little opposition. (8)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The splendid execution of the initial phases of this operation are unquestionably without parallel in the history of amphibious warfare. The almost unbelievable success of the first few days led to a rumor that the Japanese had been caught with their "pants down" and that the famed 32d Army had moved from Okinawa to Formosa, expecting American forces to land there.

This was one rumor that needed no "squelching". The rapidly mounting resistance in the XXIV Army Corps sector soon had everyone convinced that capturing the southern portion of the Island would be a hard and costly struggle. (9)

By L plus 10 there were three Divisions on the line in the XXIV Army Corps sector, the 7th, 27th, and the 96th. In the center of the line the 96th Division, of which the 382d Infantry Regiment was a part, advanced against ever-mounting resistance until they met the first heavily defended and stubbornly held Japanese positions, Tombstone and

(6) A-1, p. 7-I-1; (7) A-2, p. 25; (8) A-1, p. 7-I-1;
(9) Personal knowledge

Kakazu Ridges. (See Map C) Here the advance ground to a halt and not until 24 April, after the most bitter kind of hand-to-hand fighting, were these positions taken. (10)

The Japanese commander may have erred by abandoning his beach defenses, but his decision to withdraw all his troops to the south, where he systematically organized key terrain with maximum troops and weapons, was beginning to pay dividends. The 96th Division lost 2,004 men during this action; however, thanks to the tremendous amount of fire power available to the American infantryman, he was causing enemy casualties in the ratio of two for each American casualty. During the same action, the Division killed 4,663 and captured 6 Japanese. (11)

Another week of bitter fighting reduced the combat strength of all regiments in the 96th Division to about 52%. (12) As always when ground combat casualties are high, the regiments were almost depleted of front line riflemen. Combat efficiency had reached a low ebb; those remaining were badly in need of rest, clean clothing and a bath. Consequently, the 96th Division was relieved from front line duty on 30 April. (13)

THE REGIMENTAL SITUATION

Moving out of the lines with the 96th Division, the 382d Infantry was placed in a rest area near Koza. (See Map C) To the soldier who had seen newsreels of our European rest areas with soft beds, swimming pools, good looking girls and dances, "rest area" was hardly the name for

(10) A-3, p. 22; (11) A-3, p. 15; (12) A-3, p. 29;
(13) A-2, p. 28.

Koza. Unfortunately, Japanese artillery firing at a nearby air strip continually missed just far enough to land in the center of the rest area, and was a constant source of harrassment to the "resting" troops. Despite this, it was a relief from the front lines. Shelter tents were pitched over slit trenches, kitchens were set up, and it was only a short walk to a bath unit. Every man was given clean clothing and all equipment was put in excellent condition. (14)

On 1 May, 1,100 replacements were received by 382d Infantry. (15) To the combat veteran they were a sorry looking group - 19 and 20 year old boys with only a few weeks' basic training, completely without organization and leaders. These men were promptly assigned to companies, and given as much training as possible, with emphasis on small unit tactics, patrolling and use of demolitions. This training proved to be particularly effective. Realism was provided by the occasional Japanese soldier which practice patrols encountered, and the destruction of the caves in which these Japanese took refuge. (16)

The rest period was a short one. Just one week after receiving the replacements, the 96th Division was ordered to relieve the 7th Division in its zone of action. (17) On 8 May, the 382d Infantry was placed under operational control of the Commanding General 7th Division, and moved to a forward assembly area immediately south of Tanabaru. (See Map C) The following day the regiment relieved the 17th Infantry Regiment in its zone of action south of Kochi. (See Map C) (18)

(14) Personal knowledge; (15) A-4,p.7; (16) Personal knowledge; (17) A-5,p.131; (18) A-4,p.7.

about 6,000 yards deep, made maximum use of all the hill masses in the area. By virtue of their observation and geographical arrangement, all were able to support by fire any one or group that was attacked. (See Map D)

Each hill was prepared for defense by a complete network of tunnels and caves. These were, in most cases, large enough to provide living and storage space for the occupying troops. Mole-like digging turned the hills into fortresses providing cover, concealment and completely safe routes through which troops could move to mass their fires on any attack from any direction. Hundreds of firing positions for all types of weapons were provided by openings leading into the tunnels on several levels in all directions. Every firing position had its own field of fire and was mutually supporting with many others. The valleys between the hills afforded ideal areas for obtaining maximum range and interlocking bands of fire. Primary firing positions were protected by well dug fox holes around the openings and communication trenches which ran both laterally and from front to rear. (22)

As near as can be determined, the Japanese plan for occupation and use of these positions was to have a few men stationed in fox holes outside the caves who were to give warning when our supporting fires had lifted or our assault begun. Then all firing positions were to be occupied with approximately equal strength on the forward slope, the crest and the reverse slope. Once the defenders were dislodged from the forward and crest positions, the most tenacious part of the defense would begin. Rear (22) A-2, Ps. 105 and 107.

The Japanese made repeated attempts to retake their lost positions. Almost constant mortar and artillery fire was placed on the 1st Battalion. At about 2200 hours the Japanese launched a strong counter-attack, which was not the typical crazy banzai raid, but well-organized and desperate. (32) The battalion's outpost was destroyed and the attack developed into a hand-to-hand grenade and bayonet fight which lasted until 0730 hours the following morning. (33) When the fighting finally ceased, 122 enemy dead were counted on the position. The 1st Battalion losses: 14 killed and 62 wounded. (34) It had been a successful but costly day. The regiment had accomplished its mission by gaining a splendid position from which to participate in the Tenth Army attack. (35)

Here a word should be said in praise of the fine Naval cooperation. By firing recently developed illuminating shells, they kept enough visibility over the area so that our troops could tell friend from foe. The outcome of this counter-attack and the many which were to follow may well have been decided by this support. (36)

The regiment's first objective in the Tenth Army attack, the Dick Hill mass, had four distinct peak-like ridges, Dick Left, Dick Right, Dick Able and Dick Baker. (See Map D) Despite the all night counter-attack, the regiment jumped off as scheduled. The Japanese continued to stubbornly defend the reverse slope of Zebra. After placing all the available artillery and mortar fire on these positions, the 1st Battalion attempted to cross the crest but were immediately repulsed. About noon, C Company, with a platoon of

(32) A-4, p. 6 and A-3, p. 31; (33) A-5, p. 133; (34) A-4, p. 8; (35) Personal knowledge; (36) Personal knowledge.

tanks attached, were able to fight their way around to a nose on the right flank which provided positions from which they could lay a base of fire, pinning the Japanese in their holes while the other two companies launched a coordinated attack and quickly closed on the Japanese positions. As these positions were being occupied, C Company made a drive for Dick Baker. As soon as they reached the base of this hill, the Japanese opened up with all they had. The valley between Dick and Zebra was swept with mortar, machine gun, artillery and small arms fire. A and B Companies made an all-out effort to reach C Company's position but were repulsed. Enemy fire coming from Harriet, Baker, Flattop, Dick and Oboe Hills soon made it seem that C Company would be lost. (See Map D) Two tanks finally reached the position, loaded on the seriously wounded and provided some protection for the others as they fought their way back to the holes along the southern slopes of Zebra. (37)

The 3d Battalion was having no less trouble. On the rough southern slope of Item Hill the Japanese had reinforced their cave openings with concrete and steel. By continuing the attack throughout the day they were finally able to clear out and occupy about 200 yards of this reverse slope. (38)

By 12 May it was quite apparent that no real progress was possible in the capture of Dick Hill until the flanking fire from Harriet and Baker Hills was eliminated. (See Map D) Several 57mm anti-tank guns and M-7's were worked to positions on Zebra and Item Hills from which they could deliver (37) A-3, p. 31 and personal knowledge; (38) A-4, p. 9.

direct fire in support of a three-company coordinated attack by the 3d Battalion on Harriet and Baker Hills. (39) The plan of attack called for one company to swing to the right through the 1st Battalion zone, attack down the southeastern slope of Zebra and establish a base of fire on Harriet and Baker as the other two companies attacked frontally. (See Map D) This was a highly successful maneuver. By noon Harriet Hill was reached and by the use of flame throwers, grenades and pole charges, one company was able to establish itself on the crest of Baker Hill before dark. (40) (See Map D)

The 1st Battalion, meanwhile, spent the morning mopping up the holed-in Japanese on the southern slope of Zebra Hill. After the 3d Battalion's success on Harriet, the 1st Battalion commander decided to try again for Dick Hill. The base of Dick Baker was reached again; however, heavy casualties again drove the battalion back to their position on Zebra Hill. (41)

On 13 May in a coordinated attack by both the 1st and 3d Battalions, the 1st Battalion with A and B Companies abreast, attacked both Dick Able and Dick Baker, and were able to reach the crest of both hills. (42) Staying was another matter. The Japanese poured on one of the heaviest concentrations of fire of the campaign. At least 250 rounds of 90mm, a heavy concentration of 150mm, and a hail of mortar fire landed on the area. All but one or two men in one platoon of A Company were killed. Casualties were high in both companies. B Company had no choice but to withdraw. The 307th Infantry of the 77th Infantry Division

(39) Personal knowledge; (40) A-4, p. 9; (41) A-3, p. 32; (42) A-3, p. 33

was making a furious assault on Flattop Hill, which diverted a great deal of fire from our position and made it possible for A Company to dig in sufficiently to hold Dick Baker. (43) (See Map D)

During the attack, the Japanese efforts seem largely concentrated on the 307th Infantry and our 1st Battalion. This allowed the 3d Battalion to clean up the enemy remaining in their immediate area, and by the continued use of the flame-thrower, pole-charger tactics of the previous day to advance and dig in at the base of Dick Left. (44) (See Map D)

On 14 May the 1st Battalion made three attempts to advance over the crest of Dick Baker and around its right flank. Withering fire from Flattop and Dick Right stopped every attempt to cross this completely exposed area. One company, however, did succeed in reestablishing itself on Dick Able. (45)

The 3d Battalion, storming up the almost perpendicular face of Dick Left, were able to dig in just short of the crest. During this assault, the Japanese threw hundreds of grenades and rolled satchel charges over the crest. As soon as the battalion was within range, there followed one of the fiercest grenade duels of the war. The opposing lines were dug in on opposite sides of the crest no more than 25 or 30 yards apart. Grenades and satchel charges flew back and forth, making any consolidation of the position practically impossible. (46) In spite of grenades, satchel charges and constant infiltration attempts, morning found (43) Personal knowledge; (44) Personal knowledge; (45) A-4, p. 10; (46) A-6, no pages listed, and personal knowledge.

the battalion well dug in on the northwestern slope of Dick Left. (47)

On 15 May the 3d Battalion moved I Company by infiltration to a position on its right flank from which it was able to surprise the enemy and launch a heavily supported assault against the eastern slope of Dick Right. This was the only occasion during the entire operation on which the regiment was able to effect a surprise against the alert Japanese. As soon as the penetration was detected, the Japanese savagely counter-attacked. These attacking Japanese were "sitting ducks" for the rifles and machine guns of the rest of the battalion. The counter attack was a double failure, for while the enemy's attention was focused on the 3d Battalion, the 1st Battalion assaulted the western slope and came abreast of I Company just short of the sky line on Dick Right. An attempt was then made to go over the crest, but machine gun fire from Oboe, Flattop and Jane Hills made any effort to cross the sky line suicidal. (48) (See Map D)

During the period 16 to 20 May, the 3d Battalion made repeated attempts to occupy the southern slope of Dick Left, but were stopped in every try by fires coming from the front and both flanks. During this same period 2d Battalion passed through the 1st Battalion. (49) The major problems in the 2d Battalion sector were to eliminate the fire coming from Flattop Hill in the 307th Infantry's sector, and to get tanks back into action by

(47) A-4, p. 10; (48) A-3, p. 35 and A-4, p. 11; (49) A-5, p. 145.

eliminating the mine fields in the cut between Dick Right and Flattop. (See Map D) In close coordination with the 307th Infantry, seven tons of Bangalore Torpedoes were used to clear the mine field. (50) Tanks were then moved into firing positions through the cut, from which they were able to seal or destroy numerous large caves and pillboxes. Several tanks were lost in this action, but the results were well worth the cost. The tank-infantry team tactics enabled the 2d Battalion to completely clear the southern slopes of both Dick Right and Dick Left. The fire support they were able to deliver in the 307th Infantry's zone made it possible for that unit to finally occupy the crest of Flattop and to come abreast of the 382d Infantry. (51)

On 21 May the 96th Division placed all three regiments in line, narrowing the sector of the 382d Infantry; however it still included Oboe, Hector and Hen Hills. (52) (See Map D) The 1st Battalion was moved to the left flank in the regimental zone and launched an attack against Oboe from the east. By closely following a heavy artillery and mortar barrage, the assault companies were within 25 yards of the crest by 1500 hours. Every attempt to cross the crest was met with murderous fire from both flanks and the front. The 2d Battalion, again using tanks with the assault company, met stiff resistance; their attack was stopped shortly after it started. It was necessary to lay down a heavy smoke screen through which they were able to cross the open ground. At a point about 100 yards short of the top of Hen Hill they were forced to dig in. Companies G (50) A-5, p. 145; (51) A-4, p. 11; (52) A-3, p. 39.

and F tried going over the top, but met with the same difficulty as the 1st Battalion on Oboe Hill. (53) (See Map D)

This deep penetration made it seem that the Japanese defenses were beginning to crumble. Rapid advances had been made all along the line. Our advance would surely have continued with diminishing resistance, but nature interfered. Rain, which had been falling since 19 May, made the entire area a sea of mud, impassable to all vehicles. Due to heavy fighting during the day, all supplies, particularly grenades and ammunition, were extremely short. From this day until 29 May all supplies were of necessity air-dropped or hand-carried. (54)

Seizing this opportunity, the Japanese launched a series of counter-attacks. They tried in every conceivable way to drive the 1st Battalion off Oboe Hill. On several occasions during the period 21 to 29 May they successfully penetrated our lines, inflicting heavy casualties. (55) The 1st Battalion was so depleted that the entire battalion strength was 198 officers and enlisted men, who were reorganized into one company. (56) The 3d Battalion, which had borne the brunt of the fighting to date, was also down to about company strength. Using all drivers, cooks, and other miscellaneous personnel as riflemen, they moved up to help hold the line between Oboe and Hen Hills. (57) (See Map D)

During the stalemate which developed because of the rain, every available supporting weapon was used against the Japanese fortifications. Artillery fired nearly twenty-four hours a day. Despite heavily overcast skies, liaison planes were in the air every day, pin-pointing the enemy

(53) A-4, p. 11; (54) Personal knowledge; (55) A-3, p. 40; (56) A-4, p. 12; (57) Personal knowledge.

positions. Special fire bombs were prepared by fastening white phosphorous grenades in metal shell containers filled with napalm. By attaching a small demolition charge and rolling them onto the Japanese positions, they proved to be a great deal more effective than satchel charges in producing casualties and demoralizing the enemy. (58)

On 27 May word was received that the Japanese were pulling out of their positions, retreating to the south. Patrols started out to verify this report, but met with the same stubborn defense. Machine gun and mortar fire prevented their crossing the crest at any point along the line. Perhaps the Japanese were pulling out, but there were few in the 382d Infantry who would believe it. (59)

On 29 May the skies cleared and an attack was planned for the next day. In a coordinated attack with the 307th Infantry, the 2d Battalion jumped off. The enemy defended the reverse slope of Hen Hill with unabated and suicidal ferocity. The position fell only after courageous effort and many casualties. Once this position was taken, the battalion continued all the way to Bart Hill. (60) (See Map D) Many Japanese attempted to withdraw from in front of the 2d Battalion as the enemy positions were approached in this rapid drive. The retreating Japanese were taken under fire by the 1st Battalion and practically all were destroyed. (61)

With this success, it was evident that the main Shuri defense line was finally falling. On 31 May, after the 1st Battalion had cleared all enemy resistance on the southern slope of Oboe, the way was open for an uninterrupted pur-

(58) Personal knowledge; (59) Personal knowledge; (60) A-4, p. 12; (61) Personal knowledge.

suit of the retiring enemy. Depleted in strength, physically exhausted, but proud of its accomplishments, the 382d Infantry Regiment went into Division Reserve in the vicinity of Kochi. (62) (See Map D)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

One of the first questions that comes to mind in analyzing this attack against the Naha-Shuri-Yonabaru line is: Why did Tenth Army order this continued frontal assault? We attacked day after day along the entire line, giving the enemy many advantages, moving directly into his well-prepared fields of fire. Not a single serious attempt was made at a large-scale envelopment. An amphibious envelopment of this defense line is a subject on which much has been written and said both for and against. Why such a maneuver was not used has not been fully explained. The operation as conducted was entirely successful, obviating the necessity to explain why some other course of action was not followed. In the opinion of the writer, however, attack by our forces on either flank or the rear of this line by additional landings would have met with immediate success, saved hundreds of casualties and shortened the campaign. The enemy would have been unable to make use of his extensively prepared reverse slope defenses, and his supporting weapons would have been under our observation. A maximum amount of fire could have been placed on the enemy, while a limited amount could have been directed at our attacking troops. Any attempt by the enemy (62) Personal knowledge.

to shift his troops to meet such an attack would surely have failed. Once the enemy left the shelter of his caves, our tremendous volume of artillery and naval fire, and our complete air superiority would have annihilated them before new defenses could have been manned.

Other than the enemy, perhaps the one greatest threat to our success in this operation was the replacement problem. Their arrival was deficient in time, in quantity and in quality. The regiment did receive 1,100 replacements before this operation. The training of these replacements left much to be desired, and the time allowed from their arrival until the operation was hardly adequate for a regiment to properly process so great a number. Other striking deficiencies were their lack of organization and low morale. To maintain esprit de corps, morale and aggressiveness, it is imperative that every man know, and know well, the men alongside him in either attack or defense. The 382d Infantry constantly operated seriously short of men. There will seldom be a time when Infantry regiments in contact with the enemy cannot use as replacements a completely organized and trained squad, platoon or even company. Our replacements should have been organized, trained, shipped and assigned as units, even if the units were only squads.

With the continued development of more and more destructive artillery, bombs and demolitions, a complete study of the Okinawa defense by the Japanese will be profitable to all military commanders. Here the enemy went completely underground. Our heaviest and continued bombardment of his cave positions did very little to diminish his defense

capabilities. Their fire plan in the details of mutual support and fields of fire cannot be viewed by the military student except with admiration; there is probably no better example in the history of defensive warfare. This cave-type defense did have serious weaknesses; it restricted the number of troops who could be committed in firing positions at one time, and made a successful withdrawal almost impossible once positions were overrun. Despite the weaknesses, the Japanese undoubtedly devised the best possible defense for this area. Had he been able to replace his losses in men and materiel and gained at least some equality in air power, the Okinawa campaign might have been a different story.

The Japanese counter-attacks during this operation were far more effective than the stupid banzai raids of previous campaigns. They still had not learned proper counter-attack technique. In place of launching well coordinated attacks with all strength available, they continually attacked in small local groups seldom larger than a company, which dissipated their rapidly diminishing manpower.

The courage of the individual Japanese soldier is unquestioned. Their complete disregard for their own lives was the height of fanatical stupidity. In fire discipline and camouflage, they were undoubtedly better trained than our own men. In any over-all comparison with the average American soldier, however, the Japanese were no match mentally, physically or spiritually.

Little or no adverse criticism can be made of the 382d Infantry in its conduct of this operation. All possi-

ble use was made of organic and supporting weapons, which in every case proved to be equal or superior to the Japanese. Although the opportunity for maneuver was restricted, no opportunity went unused. The advance was necessarily slow and costly in lives; there was no short cut to victory. Enemy positions had to be assaulted and destroyed one by one. The most effective offensive tactics developed by the regiment against cave positions was to clean out the valleys, draws and forward slopes with tank-infantry teams, carrying a large supply of demolition and flame throwers. Fire was delivered on every cave position as the flame-thrower and demolition men moved in. The positions were then burned out and destroyed by demolition. In the attack of reverse slopes, strength was concentrated on one or both flanks until a point was reached from which automatic weapons could fire on the reverse slope fortifications while an assault was launched with grenades, flame throwers and demolitions.

In final analysis, the operation was successful, largely because of the unflinching courage and determined efforts of the doughboy, who even in the most disheartening conditions continued to dig, shoot, blast and burn until the stubborn enemy was finally annihilated.

LESSONS LEARNED

There are many valuable lessons to be taken from this operation, both from our own actions and those of our enemy. The most outstanding are:

1. Fortified areas, whenever possible, should be attacked laterally rather than frontally.

2. Replacements should be organized, trained and assigned as units.
3. All Infantry soldiers must have training in the use of demolitions prior to an attack on a fortified area.
4. Flexibility in organization must be maintained even in small units.
5. Infantry must plan and train to operate at much less than T/O & E strength.
6. Mutually supporting cave and tunnel positions are ideally suited for defense in hills.
7. Camouflage must be a continuous process.
8. Any successful defense must be prepared in adequate depth to contain a penetration, with sufficient reserves available to restore lost positions caused by any penetration.
9. Infantry units must be trained to closely follow artillery and mortar barrages.
10. Artillery and air bombardment are relatively ineffective in the destruction of well dug cave positions.