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1946-1947

The Operations on MAKIN Atoll
20-24 November 1943

Type of Operation Described:
Infantry Division Task Force in an Amphibious Assault

Lieutenant Colonel Carl H. Fernstrom
Coast Artillery

The operations on Makin Atoll, 20-24 Nov
1943, by Lt Col C. H. Fernstrom, CA.
Command & Staff College. 1946-47.

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~~REPORT TO
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The Capture of MAKIN, War Department Historical Division.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this monograph is to cover the operations of the 27th Infantry Division Task Force from the organization and plans of the Force in the HAWAIIAN Islands, its movement to MAKIN and the assault that captured the Atoll.

In order to become oriented, let us look at some geography. (Refer to Map 1.) It will be seen that the GILBERT Islands straddle the Equator roughly 2000 miles south west of the HAWAIIAN Islands. Also note the relation of the GILBERTS to other localities of interest as FUNAFUTI, SAMOAN Islands, SOLOMAN Islands, FIJI Islands, NEW GUINEA, CAROLINE Islands, MARIANAS Islands and JAPAN.

Looking at Map 2, we have the GILBERT-MARSHALL Area more in detail. Note the relation of MAKIN to TARAWA 105 miles to the south, to APAMAMA, to OCEAN and NAURU. Also note its relation to important Atolls in the MARSHALLS.

Before World War II, the GILBERTS were under British Colonial Administration. The Japanese seized MAKIN on 10 December 1941 and converted it into a seaplane base. In September 1942 they occupied TARAWA with a considerable garrison and built an air strip. On APAMAMA they established an observation outpost. On OCEAN and NAURU they also built up air bases. In addition, the Japanese obtained from NAURU, phosphates which were important to their munitions industry. These bases combined with those in the MARSHALLS formed an interlocking system of defense.

Returning to Map 1, it can be seen why the GILBERTS were important. From the bases there, the Japanese struck at our advanced staging areas such as CANTON Island and FUNAFUTI. Japanese observation planes could report the movements of our convoys and could direct submarines and bombers to points of interception.

Conversely, once we controlled the GILBERTS, our routes to the Southwest Pacific would be shortened and protected, we would deny JAPAN the use of the phosphates of NAURU, and we would have bases from which to conduct operations against the MARSHALLS.

By July 1943, it was apparent to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that sufficient amphibious and ground forces would be available for the Central Pacific Area to conduct operations against the GILBERT Islands. Accordingly, Admiral Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas, was directed to initiate planning and organization for these operations. After almost two years of defense, we were to take the offensive in the Central Pacific Area.

THE TACTICAL PLAN

The entire operation in the GILBERTS was given the code name "Galvanic", with the objective of TARAWA given to the Marines, and the objective of MAKIN given to the Army. The staff of the 27th Infantry Division was given the mission of drafting a plan for the organization and operations of a task force to accomplish the Army's mission.

Intelligence of conditions on MAKIN was obtained in several ways. The 27th Division's assistant G-2 in the submarine "Nautilus" cruised in the vicinity of MAKIN, taking pictures of the shoreline through the periscope. Mosaics were obtained from the Seventh Air Force photographic reconnaissance flights of 23 July 1942, 20 February 1943 and 11 July 1943. Pictures were obtained from a raid by carrier-based planes on 18-19 September 1943. Useful data was obtained from the report of Carlson's Marine Raiders on their night raid of 16-17 August 1942. Two former residents of MAKIN, a Lt. Commander of the Royal Australian Navy and a soldier from the 1st Fiji Infantry, added more useful data.

From the foregoing, a composite picture was obtained of the terrain. (Refer to Map 3.) MAKIN Atoll is an irregular formation of reefs and islands around a large lagoon. The main passage into the lagoon passes just north of the northwestern tip of BUTARITARI. BUTARITARI is the largest and the most important island. It was here that the Japanese developed a seaplane base. BUTARITARI and KUMA are connected by a reef, the east side of which is high enough to permit crossing on foot at low tide. Heavy surf beats on the southern shore of BUTARITARI. At the western end of the island, the beaches are widely separated from each other and very narrow. Jagged coral pinnacles make approaches to them difficult. They are freer of heavy surf than the southern beaches and were believed to offer suitable access to the island.

Once ashore, the dominant vegetation would be cocoanut palms. However, along the lagoon shore and at the edges of ponds, mangroves and salt brush would be found. For food the natives raise a taro like plant called "Bobai" which they grow in pits. These pits have soft banks and mucky bottoms, and being covered by vegetation, would be definite obstacles to troops and vehicles.

The terrain is so flat that there is no natural point of observation. After rains, extensive areas are covered by shallow ponds surrounded by marshland. Running the length of BUTARITARI and KUMA is a coral sand highway, resembling a causeway where it crosses the marshes. At low tide, portions of the reef are bared which could be used for the passage of vehicles.

Reference Map 4, air photographs revealed certain features. About 3,000 yards from the western end of BUTARITARI lay a clearing from lagoon to ocean with in which an antitank ditch had been dug. About two miles northeast of this ditch was another. Between these two obstacles, the Japanese concentrated their principal installations and built their main defenses. In the vicinity of this area was seen four wharves of varying lengths.

An estimate of the Japanese strength on MAKIN was that there were about 800 troops operating 4 heavy and 4 medium antiaircraft guns, from 20 to 40 machine guns and the rifles of one company. The proximity of MAKIN to the airfields and seaplane bases at TARAWA, MILI, JALUIT, WOTJE, MALOELAP, NAURU and KWAJALEIN made Japanese air strikes from them a possibility.

The weather will be discussed only to say it was investigated and was considered to be favorable for the contemplated operations.

From the information of the enemy, the terrain and the weather, the tactical plan was developed. Landings at MAKIN and TARAWA were to begin simultaneously at 0830, 20 November 1943. The 2d Marine Division was to assault TARAWA leaving one of its combat teams in reserve for the support of either TARAWA or MAKIN. If this reserve was uncommitted, it was later to occupy APAMAMA.

For the taking of MAKIN, the following plan was developed. The 27th Infantry Task Force was organized as shown in Chart 1. Referring to Map 4, beaches were designated as Red Beach 1, Red Beach 2 and Yellow Beach. The 1st BLT was to land on Red Beach 1, and the 3d BLT was to land on Red Beach 2, both at 0830, and to penetrate inland to the east, while special detachments were to protect their flanks to the north and south. If all went well according to plan on the Red Beaches, the 2d BLT was to land within the lagoon at Yellow Beach at 1030, with special detachments protecting its east and west flanks. If difficulties were encountered at the Red Beaches, the landing at Yellow Beach was to be postponed, and the 2d BLT would be committed in support of the other two BLTs on the Red Beaches.

The Seventh Air Force was to soften up the island during the week preceding the attack by bombers. It was to provide photographic reconnaissance on the day preceding the attack. It was to strike NAURU and air strips in the MARSHALLS from which the Japanese might send aid during the action.

Navy carrier-based bombers were to strike installations from daylight till 1615, thereafter to maintain air patrols, submarine reconnaissance, search flights, artillery spotting, observation liaison, and light bombing and strafing as needed.

At 0620 there was to be a prearranged naval bombardment from 4 battleships and 4 cruisers directed on the western shore from KOTABU Island to UKIANGONG Point.

When the first wave of boats was 800 yards from the Red Beaches, carrier-based fighters were to strafe the beaches and vicinity. When the boats reached a point 100 yards from shore, the fighters were to withdraw while bombers were to hit defense installations from 500 to 1,000 yards inland. Fifteen minutes after the first wave landed, the bombers were to withdraw.

The same pattern of bombardment, strafing and bombing was to precede the attack on Yellow Beach.

For control, a line was established 1600 yards inland from the Red Beaches, called a "Beachhead Line" to which the 1st and 3d BLT's were to advance but not go beyond prior to 1030, in order not to be endangered by falling missiles in the preparation for Yellow Beach attack. Here the 1st BLT was to take over the whole line while the 3d BLT was to go into reserve.

The Field Artillery batteries landing with the BLT's at the Red Beaches were to pass at once from battalion control and to take positions at UKIANGONG Point. From here they were to cover any part of the Japanese main defensive position on call.

After the 2d BLT landed at Yellow Beach, it was to cut across the island from lagoon to ocean. Then part of the force would execute a holding action to the east, while the main effort would be toward the west in the direction of the Japanese west tank obstacle.

After 1030, the 1st BLT would be advancing eastward toward the west tank obstacle. Thus this barrier would be enveloped from front and rear. When this barrier was taken, a drive could be made eastward the length of the island to its last point, and special detachments would be dispatched to seize the outpost islands.

TRAINING

Although the 27th Division had trained for beach landings and jungle fighting since arriving in the HAWAIIAN Islands, the prospect of actual combat encouraged intensive training for the operations on MAKIN. Of the 6,470 men in the 27th Division Task Force, approximately 1,300 were in attached units. This called for considerable training in coordination and cooperation, to weld the whole into a fighting team.

Refresher training was conducted on all phases of Infantry subjects. In addition, jungle woodcraft, jungle lore and tropical hygiene were now studied. Weapons training and practice with live hand grenades were emphasized.

Training was held from small unit problems in jungle fighting to regimental combat team exercises. Some of the problems involved were daylight attacks in close terrain, hasty and prepared defenses, night operations, perimeter defense, day and night withdrawal, the attack of fortified positions in jungle terrain, and the elimination of snipers.

Exercises were held in amphibious training with floating equipment; practice in swimming and staying afloat fully clothed and wearing an infantry pack; loading and unloading supplies; and ship to shore rehearsals under naval gunfire and air bombing, controlled by shore fire control parties.

However, time was insufficient for infantry and tank crews to develop adequate effectiveness together. An unsolved problem was the communication between crews inside tanks and the infantryman outside.

MOVEMENT TO MAKIN

The 27th Infantry Task Force for movement was loaded and organized as shown on Chart 2. The main body of this force left PEARL HARBOR in the HAWAIIAN Islands on 10 November 1943. Along with these troop carrying ships were 4 battleships, 4 cruisers, 9 aircraft carriers and 10 destroyers. At the same time that this force was moving toward MAKIN, an even larger force was advancing on TARAWA.

The nature of the expedition was explained to the troops two hours after the departure from OAHU. During the voyage, intelligence material was studied from maps, sand tables, mosaics, and photo-interpretation charts. Squads and detachments reviewed their assignments.

As the expedition approached MAKIN, several Japanese planes were seen and some engaged. Also, the Japanese were known to have radar installations on MAKIN, so the expedition could not count on surprise.

In the early hours of 20 November 1943, the Task Force arrived off MAKIN. The transports moved to a designated transport area about four miles west of the island. Between 0258 and 0600, no enemy fire was received. The Task Force prepared to launch its attack.

FIRST DAY'S OPERATIONS

The assault opened with air strikes as planned. The transports from their assigned area 6,000 yards from the beaches, lowered their small boats. The warships, after the planes had completed their missions, opened up with the preplanned bombardment. At 0645, a special detachment in two LCVP's, headed for KOTABU Island in order to secure the entrance to the lagoon. At 0818, the first waves of landing craft of the 1st and 3d BLT's crossed the line of departure, with a further run of 14 minutes to the beaches. The beaches were found to be narrow and poor, and in one portion of Red Beach 1, it was found to be no beach at all. The poor conditions at the beaches, however, were compensated for in part, by the extremely light enemy opposition.

The 1st and 3d BLT's moved inland from the Red Beaches according to plan. They were opposed by sniper fire, but more difficulty was encountered from the terrain which had been well chewed up from the bombardment. (Refer to Map 5) They moved forward to the beachhead line where the 1st BLT took over the entire line, while the 3d BLT went the reserve area indicated. The special detachments moved toward FLINK Point and UKIANGONG Point. The movement to FLINK Point was slow but UKIANGONG Point was quickly reached and by 1100, the field artillery guns were ashore to be emplaced there.

Natives began coming out of their hiding places in the brush. To get them out of the way, they were given water and food and moved toward FLINK Point. About 480 congregated there, some being used for a labor force. They seemed to be pleased that the Americans had come.

Since the landings on the Red Beaches were progressing without strong opposition, the 2d BLT was ordered to make landings on Yellow Beach. The special detachment that went to KOTABU Island took possession of an empty island, so the entrance to the lagoon was secure. The 2d BLT, when 500 yards offshore, came under machine gun cross-fire. When ashore, the special detachments designated to protect the flanks, went

to "On Chong's" and "King's" wharves where they cleared the enemy and constructed defensive beach blocks. The men from the 2d BLT, for the most part, had to get out of their landing craft while 250 yards offshore and wade in chest deep. The intensity of enemy fire increased. Radios, flame-throwers, bazookas and other equipment became soaked or lost. (Reference Map 4)

The 2d BLT pushed across the island from lagoon to ocean, and according to plan, split, the left wing turning to the east to hold a line across the island while the right wing turned to the west to advance on the west tank barrier and defenses from the rear, and to make contact with the 1st BLT advancing eastward. The attack was closely coordinated, using phase lines to bring the 1st BLT to the west tank barrier at the same time that the 2d BLT overcame the defenses from the opposite side. At this time artillery and naval gunfire support was not feasible due to the proximity of units on each side of the barrier. Besides, the soaking of radio instruments made communications almost impossible. At this time it would be well to look at Map 6, showing the nature and location of the enemy's defenses.

By 1230, elements of the 2d BLT were in line facing the eastern edge of the west tank barrier. The 1st BLT was well along in its advance from the beachhead line to the western edge of the tank barrier clearing, opposed mostly by tree and ground snipers. Elements of the 1st BLT were held up in front of the north flank of the west tank barrier. Colonel Conroy, commanding officer of the 165th Infantry, came forward to see what was holding up the advance, and was struck between the eyes from the fire of a concealed machine gun. At 1455, on the first day, the three BLTs had lost their regimental commander. Colonel Kelley assumed command.

The fighting on both sides of the west tank barrier consisted in knocking out dug in emplacements and shelters. However, by about 1700, contact between the 1st and 2d BLTs extended the length of the barrier.

In the entire zone from the western beaches to the center of the enemy's main defensive area enemy resistance had been overcome except for one small pocket northwest of the west tank barrier. Orders were given to break off hostilities, and select and secure positions for the night. (See Map 7).

During the night, the Japanese were energetic and active. Some of the enemy who had been cut off, moved eastward to rejoin their forces. Others moved from the east back into areas which had been cleared, to harass our troops in fox holes and to set up machine guns in positions of advantage for the following day. This activity caused much trigger-happy firing by our troops and much sleepless anxiety.

SECOND DAY'S OPERATIONS

The plan for the second day provided for elements of the 2d BLT to push eastward toward the eastern tank barrier. The 1st BLT was to clear out snipers near the west tank barrier and thence westward to the Red Beaches.

A 105 mm howitzer barrage was fired ahead of the 2d BLT and as far as the east tank barrier from 0700 to 0820, and from 0945 till 1010. At 0835, bombing and strafing by air was furnished.

The operations of the advancing front consisted of clearing out pillboxes, dugouts and log-revetted emplacements. Coordination between tanks and infantry constantly improved.

By 1730, an advance to the line shown on Map 8 was achieved, and orders were issued to prepare defenses for the night.

As on the previous night, there was much enemy activity and patrolling. However, the experience gained from the night before enabled our troops to take precautionary measures, and the trigger-happy firing was reduced.

THIRD DAY'S OPERATIONS

At 0600 on the third day, the 3d BLT moved from the reserve area to relieve the 2d BLT from its positions near the east tank barrier. From 0700 to 0820, the artillery from UKLANGONG Point fired a barrage at the east tank barrier, after which it displaced forward to the vicinity of the Yellow Beach area. The 3d BLT attacked at 0800 aided by light and medium tanks. At 1100, two reinforced platoons from Company A, 165th Infantry, in six Alligators, moved over the lagoon to a position eastward of the east tank barrier, where the island at a bight narrows to a width of 150 yards. Here, at 1230, they set up a machine gun barrier to prevent the escape of any enemy from the east tank barrier positions. (Reference Map 9)

A special detail from Company M, 105th Infantry, left in 10 LVTs at 1200 for KUMA Island, and at 1430, set up machine guns and defenses there to prevent any enemy from escaping from BUTARITARI to KUMA.

The 3d BLT pressed forward against the east tank barrier. The combined attack from air, artillery, tank guns and infantry weapons had reduced it before it was reached. By 1040, it was passed. The speedy advance of the 3d BLT brought it at 1330, to the bight where Company A had established a line.

At 1510, Major General Ralph C. Smith, the Divisional Commander, assumed command of the island forces. He received instructions from Admiral Turner for the early reembarkation of the 1st and 2d BLTs, all the medium tanks, and all the air and naval gunfire liaison officers.

The 3d BLT advanced some 2,100 yards beyond the bight and stopped at 1645, to prepare defenses for the night. As soon as darkness fell, the enemy made attacks on the defensive perimeters. Barefoot Japanese ran upon the fox holes and gun positions, fired at almost point blank range, and were engaged by our troops with knives and clubbed weapons. Grenades sailed back and forth. Between attacks the Japanese crawled back to their own lines to drink saki. Daylight brought relief. This last Japanese action came to be called "Saki Night". It was the last concerted resistance by a desperate remnant of the original enemy force.

FOURTH DAY'S OPERATIONS

The 3d BLT formed for an advance to mop up the remaining 4 miles of the island. Only sniper fire was encountered, and by 1030, the tip of BUTARITARI was reached.

Further operations consisted of combing BUTARITARI for Japanese and reconnoitering the other islands of MAKIN Atoll. Preparations were made for the departure of the assault forces.

General Smith reported to Admiral Turner, "MAKIN taken. Recommend command pass to commander garrison force".

CONCLUSION

The main problem in the operation was coordinating the attacking force. Space was cramped on the narrow Island of BUTARITARI. Control of fire was difficult due to the flat terrain and limited area.

It is felt that the tactical plan was adequate. Any errors in the assumptions tended to offset each other. The landing beaches being poorer than expected was compensated for by the enemy opposition being lighter than expected. The hope that the enemy would move forward from his defensive area to oppose the landings at the Red Beaches so that he could be taken from the rear was not realized. However, the air strikes, naval bombardment and double attack so thoroughly disorganized the enemy's plan of defense that surprisingly few casualties were suffered.

The Army fared better than the Navy in casualties as the following tabulation shows:

	Deaths	Wounded and injured
Army	66	185
Navy	752	291

The Navy's largest single loss was from the sinking of the carrier, "Liscombe Bay", by a Japanese submarine, when 702 men were lost.

Prisoners were few, there being only 3 Japanese and 101 Koreans captured.

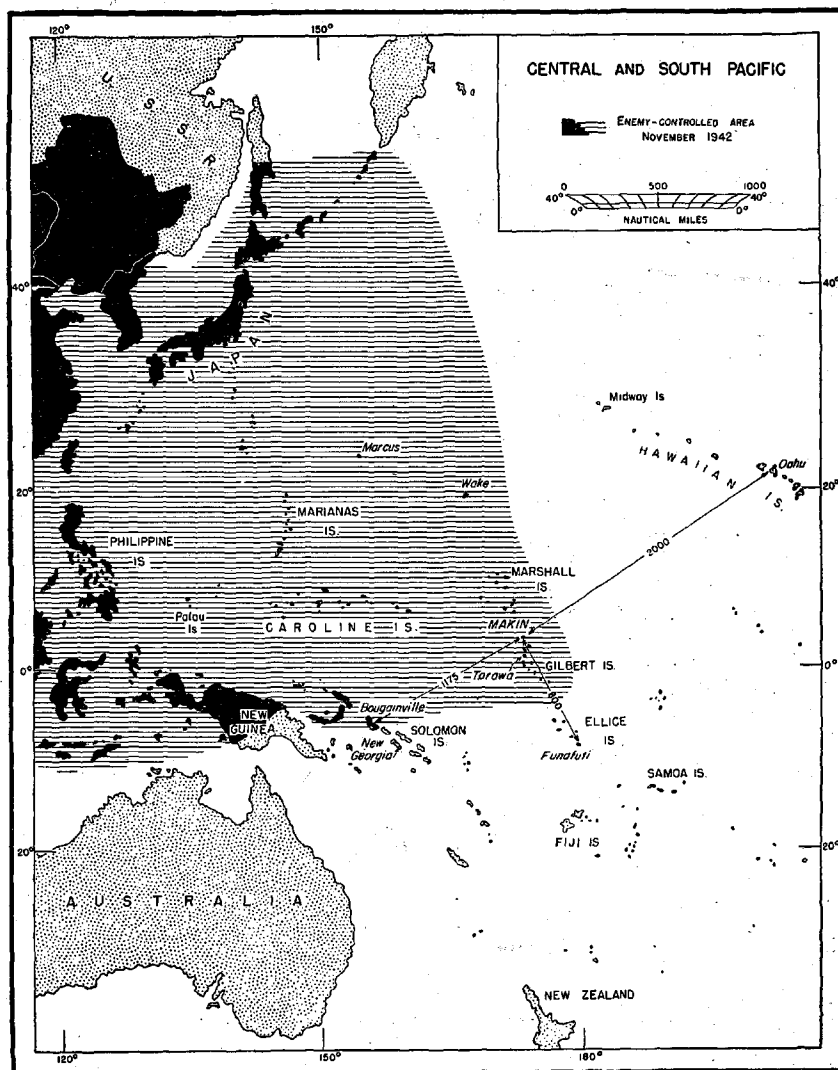
LESSONS LEARNED

From the experience in the MAKIN operation, the Army learned valuable lessons for the fighting ahead on Pacific Atolls. The difficulties with the terrain indicated the need for closer reconnaissance of beach conditions and more thorough air photographic cover. Heavier and more **concentrated** prearranged fire was found to be necessary in order to destroy Japanese underground shelters. Improved methods of waterproofing equipment, especially radios and vehicles, was found to be essential.

Tank-infantry cooperation improved so much during the first day's action, that it was felt that such teamwork could exist at the start of an operation with sufficient training together. It was recommended that a telephone be installed in the rear of each tank to enable the infantry outside to talk to the tank crews.

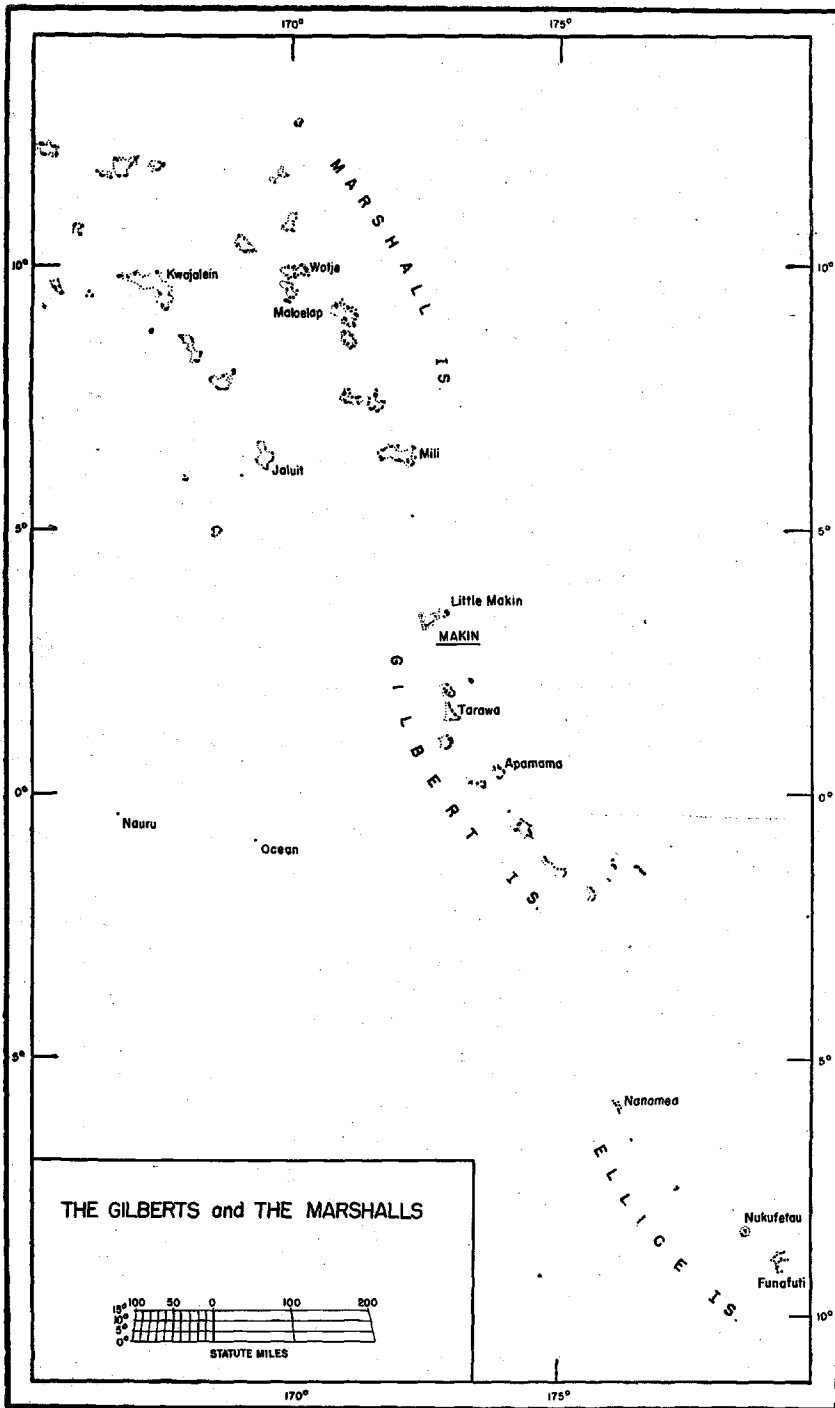
In the MAKIN operation, the sequence among landing waves was first Alligators, then tanks, and then the infantry. This sequence worked so well that it was recommended for future operations.

Finally, an appreciation was gained of the cooperation that the ground forces, air forces and Navy must employ together for an amphibious operation.



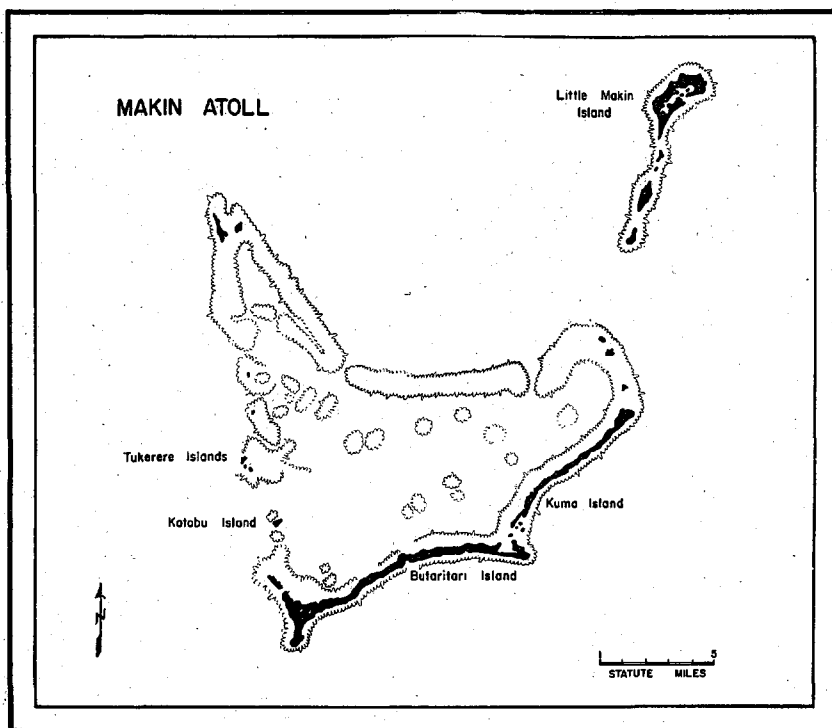
MAP NO. 1

Map 1 Central and South Pacific.

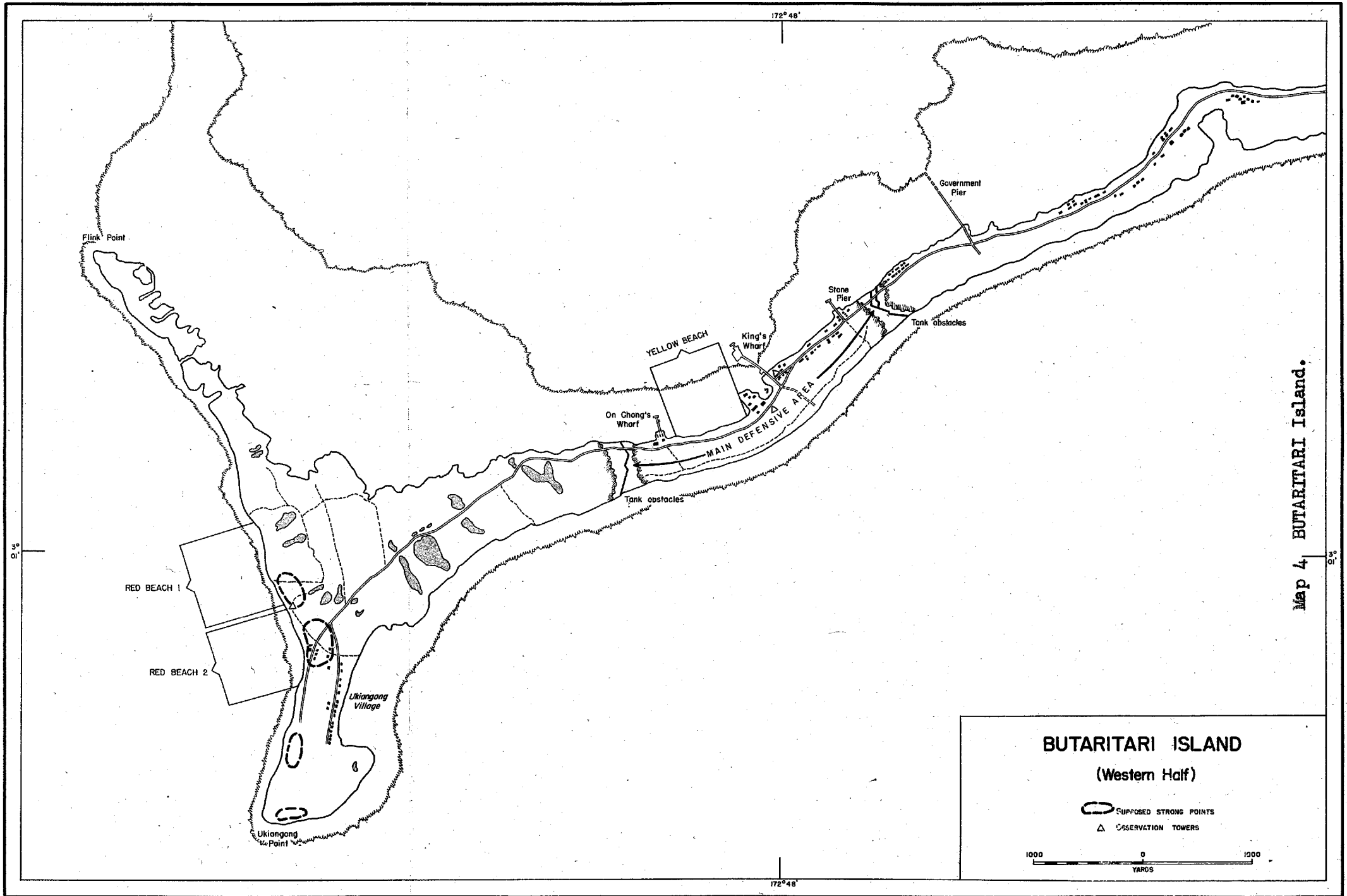


MAP NO. 2

Map 2 The Gilberts and the Marshalls.



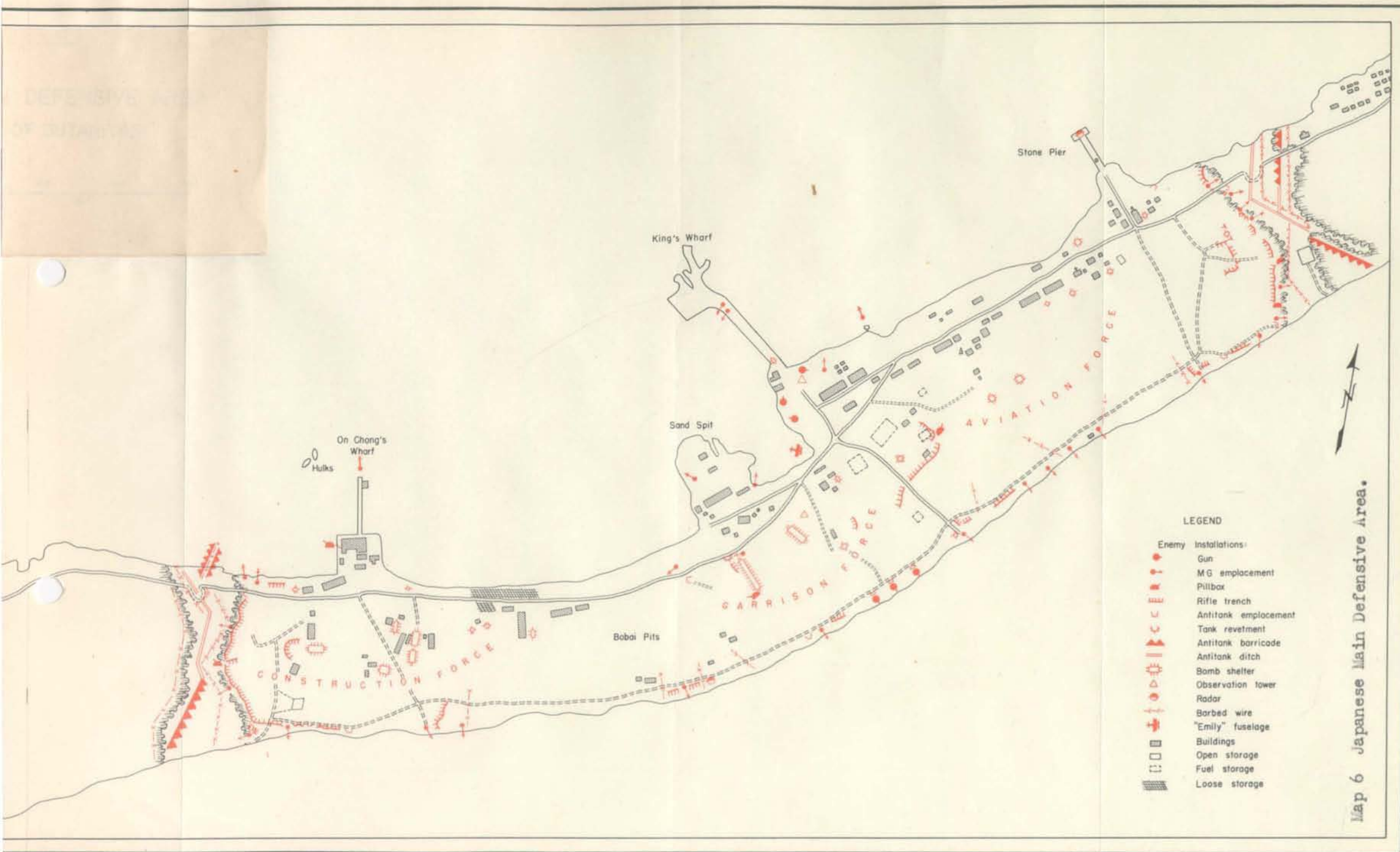
Map 3 MAKIN Atoll.



Map 4 BUTARITARI Island.

4

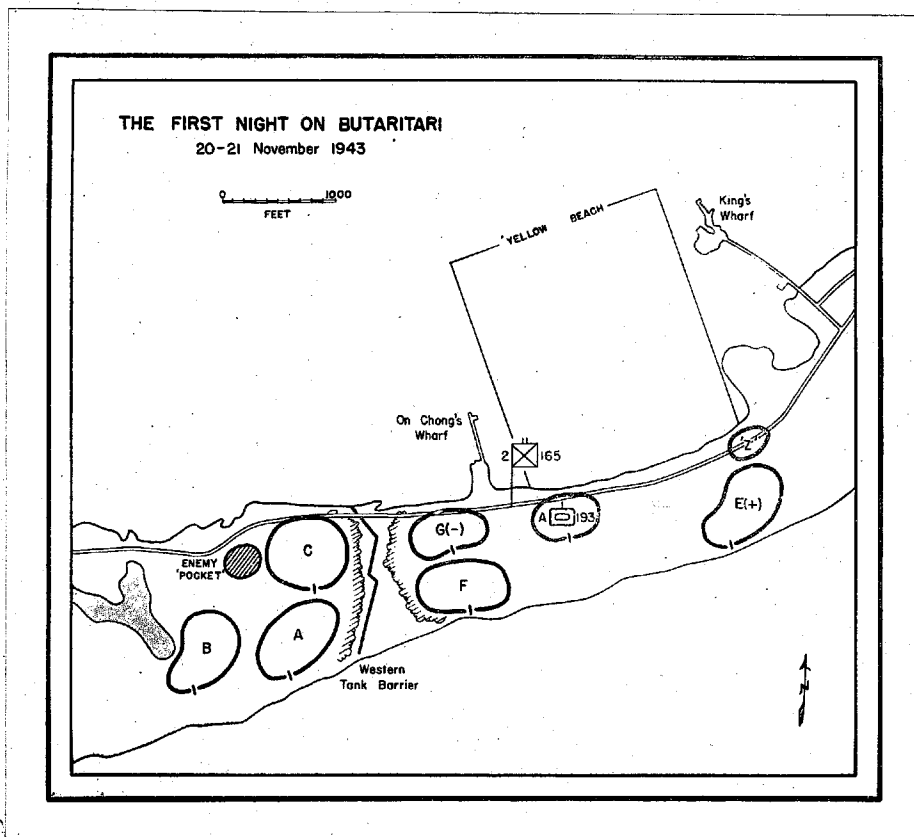
DEFENSIVE
OF ISLAND



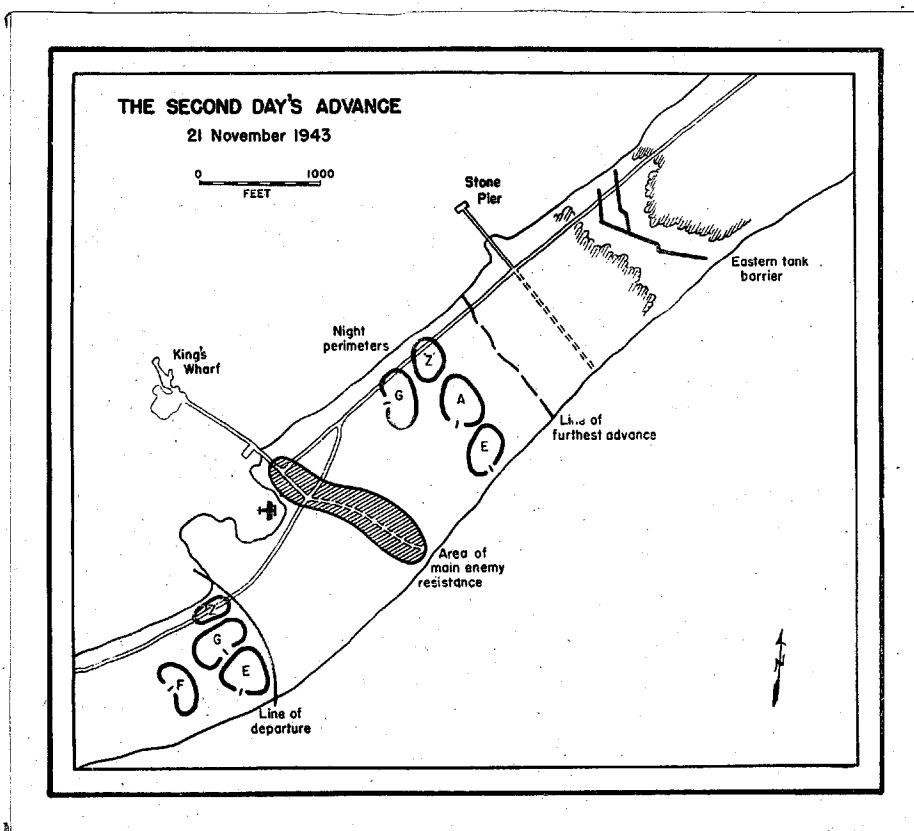
LEGEND

- | | |
|-------|----------------------|
| Enemy | Installations: |
| | Gun |
| | M G emplacement |
| | Pillbox |
| | Rifle trench |
| | Antitank emplacement |
| | Tank revetment |
| | Antitank barricade |
| | Antitank ditch |
| | Bomb shelter |
| | Observation tower |
| | Radar |
| | Barbed wire |
| | "Emily" fuselage |
| | Buildings |
| | Open storage |
| | Fuel storage |
| | Loose storage |

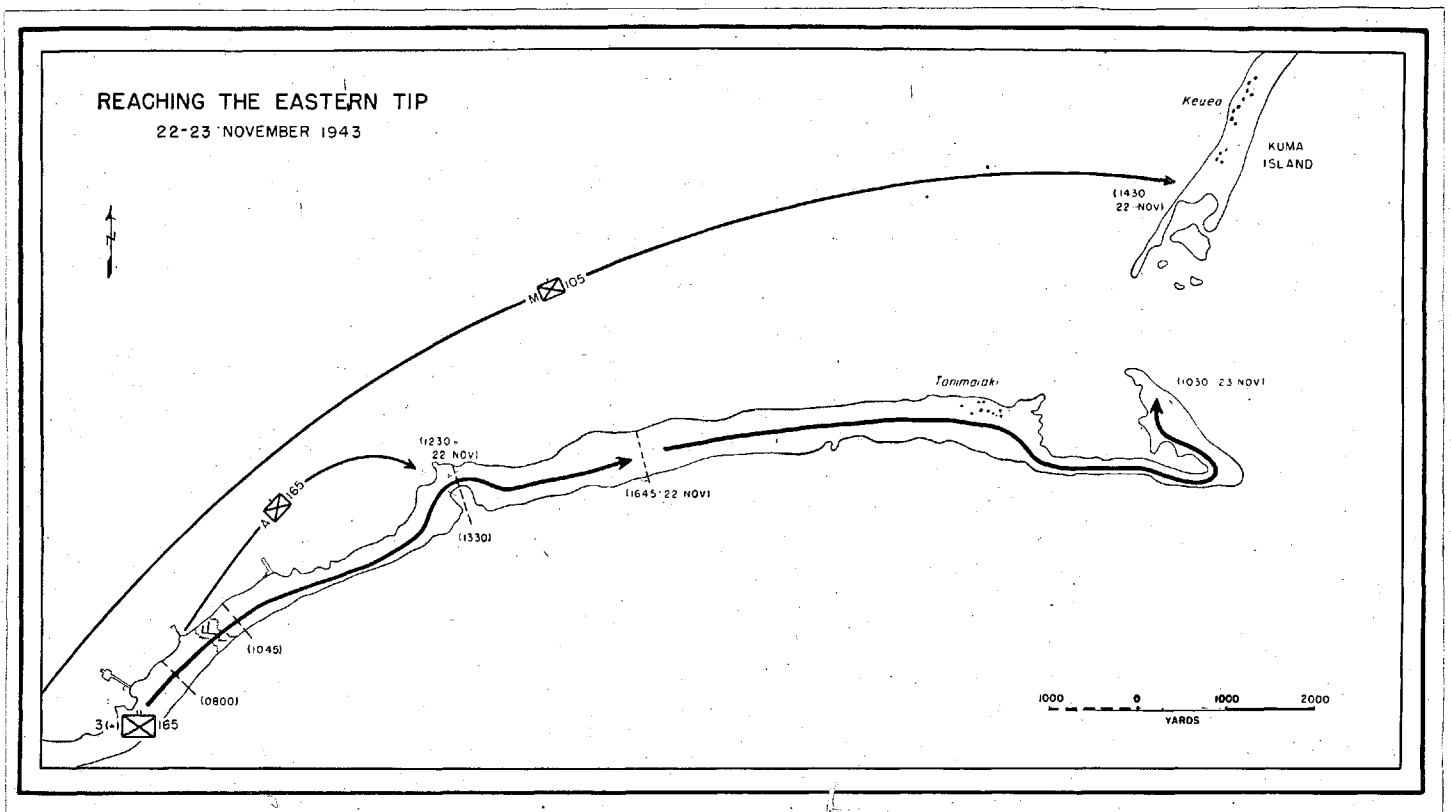
Map 6 Japanese Main Defensive Area.



Map 7 The First Night on BUTARITARI



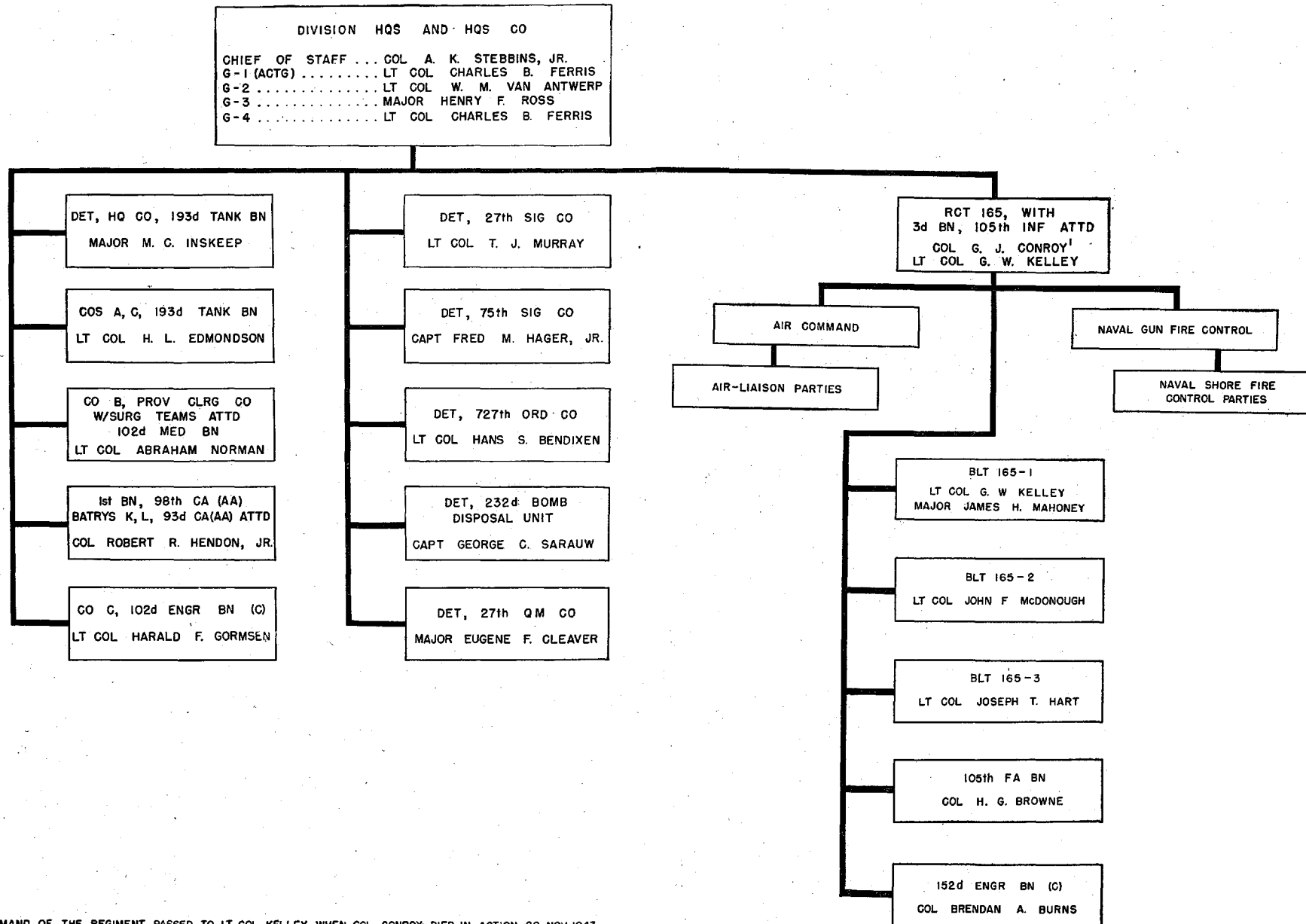
Map 8 The Second Day's Advance.



Map 9 Reaching the Eastern Tip.

27th DIVISION TASK
MAJOR GENERAL

FORCE (52.6) AT MAKIN
RALPH C. SMITH



¹COMMAND OF THE REGIMENT PASSED TO LT COL KELLEY WHEN COL CONROY DIED IN ACTION, 20 NOV. 1943.

Chart 1 27th Division Task Force Organization.

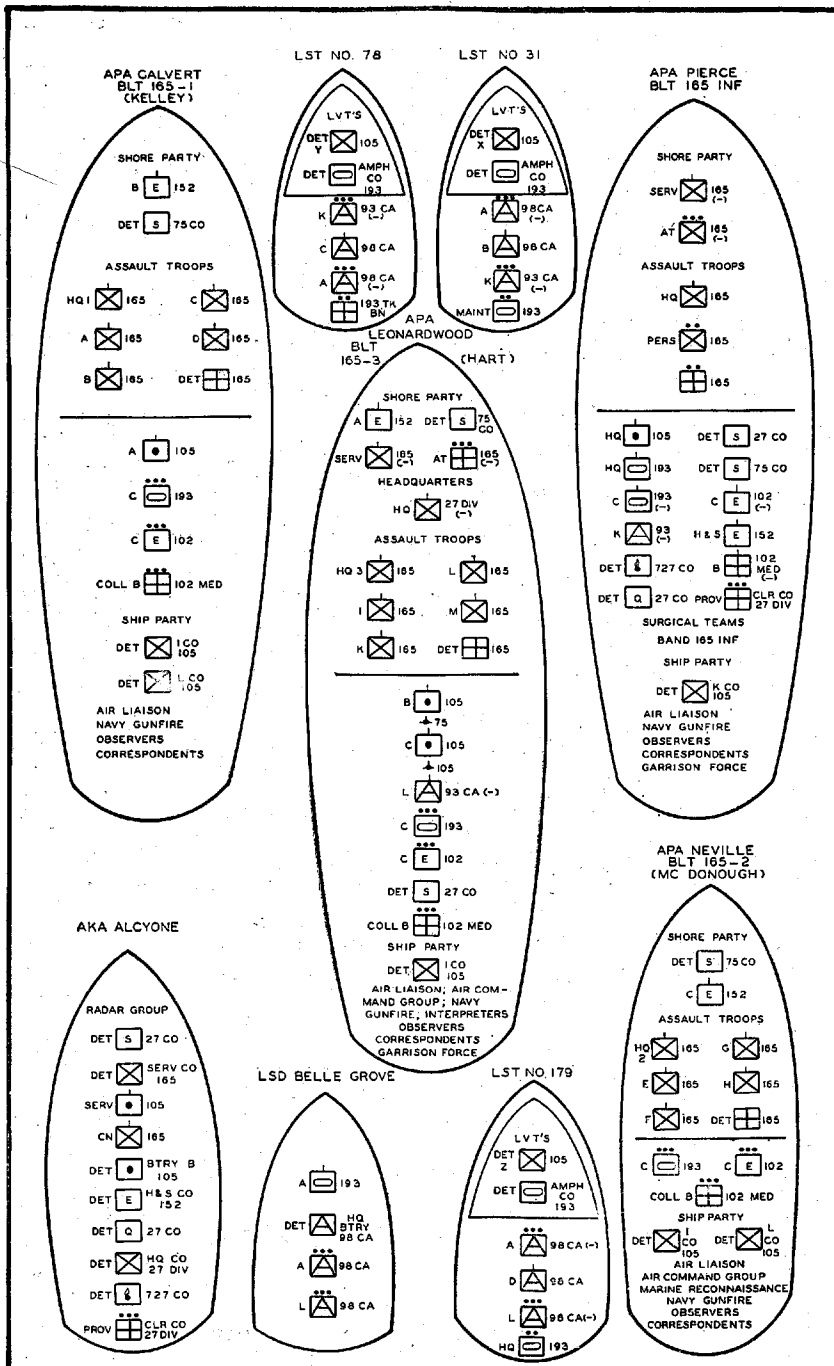


Chart 2 Loading Plan.



Photo 1 BUTARITARI from the Southwest.

- A Red Beach 1
- B Red Beach 2
- U UKIANGONG Point
- W West Tank Barrier
- Y Yellow Beach



Photo 2 Portion of Red Beach 1.



Photo 3 Portion of Red Beach 2.

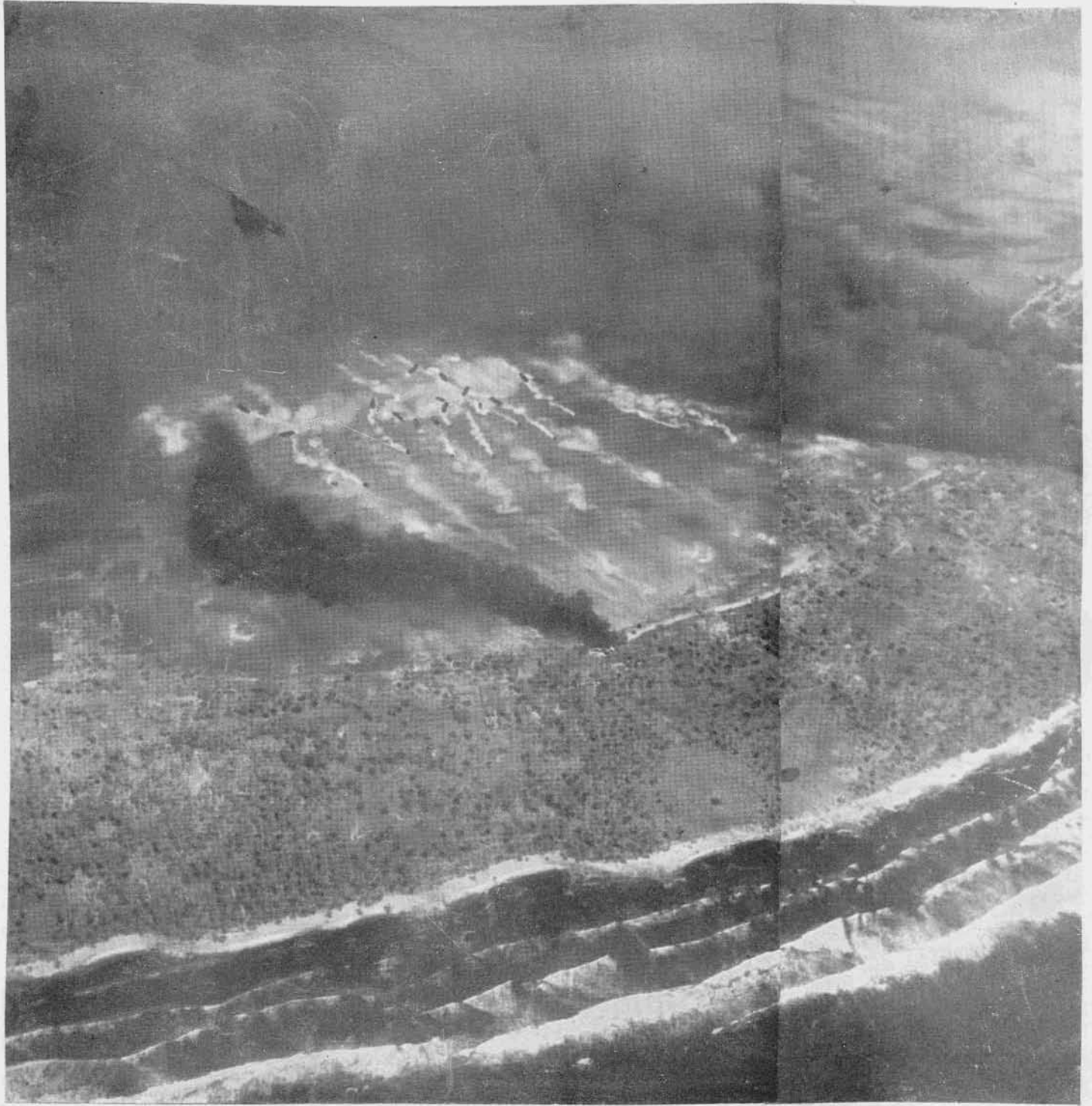


Photo 4 Assault on Yellow Beach.



Photo 5 Approaching Yellow Beach.



Photo 6 Approaching Yellow Beach.

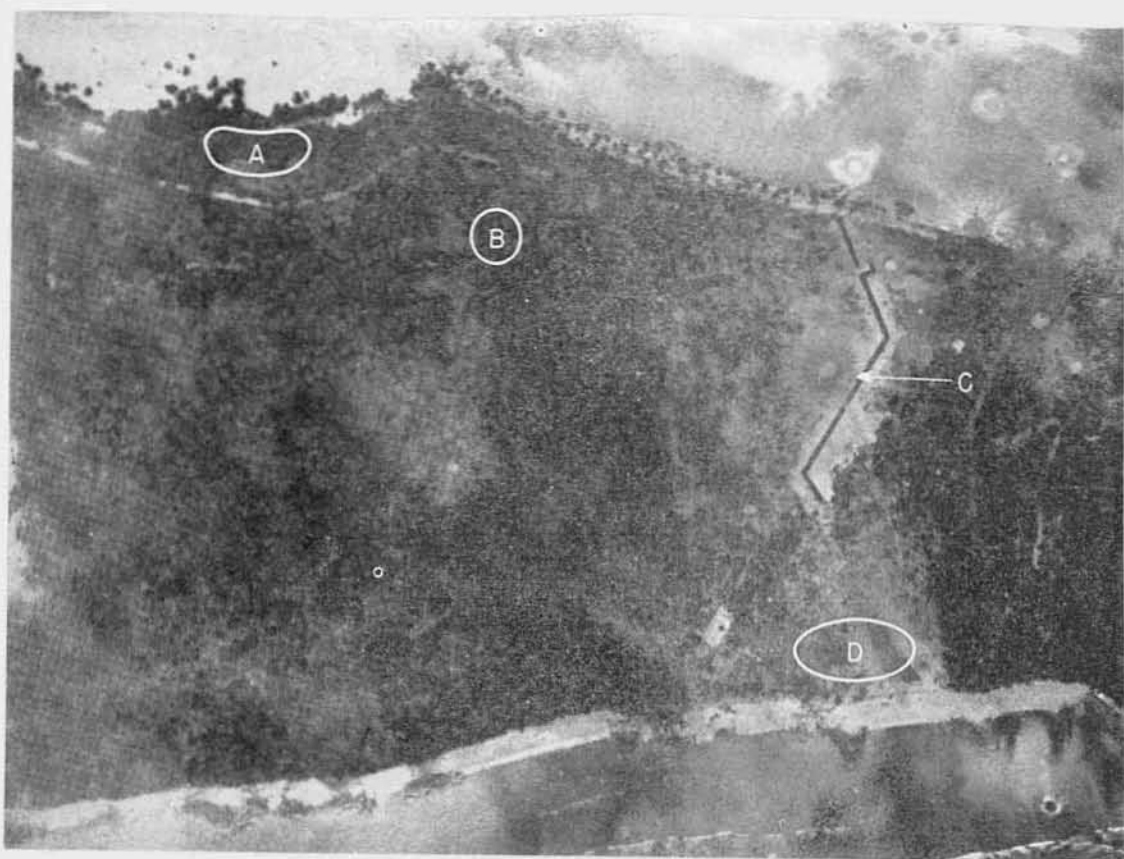


Photo 7 West Tank Barrier.

- A Place where Colonel Conroy was killed.
- B Concealed Machine Gun that killed Colonel Conroy.
- C Strong defensive position that delayed the 2d BLT.
- D Flank contact established between 1st and 2d BLT's prior to 1500, D-day.



Photo 8 Light Tank Mired in Shell Hole.



Photo 9 King's Wharf.



Photo 10 Movement foward of the 3d Bn, 165th Infantry.

Third Battalion, 165th Infantry, marching early on 22 November 1943 from the reserve area to continue the eastward attack.