

Defensive Engagement, April 1945



By the end of March, 32d Army was fairly well prepared to resist invasion, although a last-minute personnel shuffle interfered with unit cohesion. The U.S. preparatory bombardment soon began. On 23 March 1945, American carrier planes bombed Okinawa, and on 24 March, a preparatory naval bombardment rained down 13,000 6- and 16-inch shells. These fires had no specific targets, however, and amounted to little more than area fire. The 32d Army's concealment had been so effective that, despite daily aerial reconnaissance, the American gunners did not know where on the island it was.¹

On 26 March, American forces secured the Kerama Islands, sixty miles west of Naha, and placed eight 105-mm guns there. The Japanese went to "War Preparations A"—namely, full readiness. The few available *kamikaze* aircraft on Okinawa sortied from Kadena airfield on 27, 28, and 29 March and damaged some American ships.² To raise morale, Lieutenant General Cho put up a sign next to the 32d Army command cave that read "Heaven's Grotto Battle Headquarters," a lighthearted reference to the national foundation myth. What really raised morale, however, was that the arduously constructed cave fortresses had protected their occupants fully against the 16-inch naval shells. Until the shelling began, the Japanese staff and soldiers had not been sure whether their caves would really protect them.³

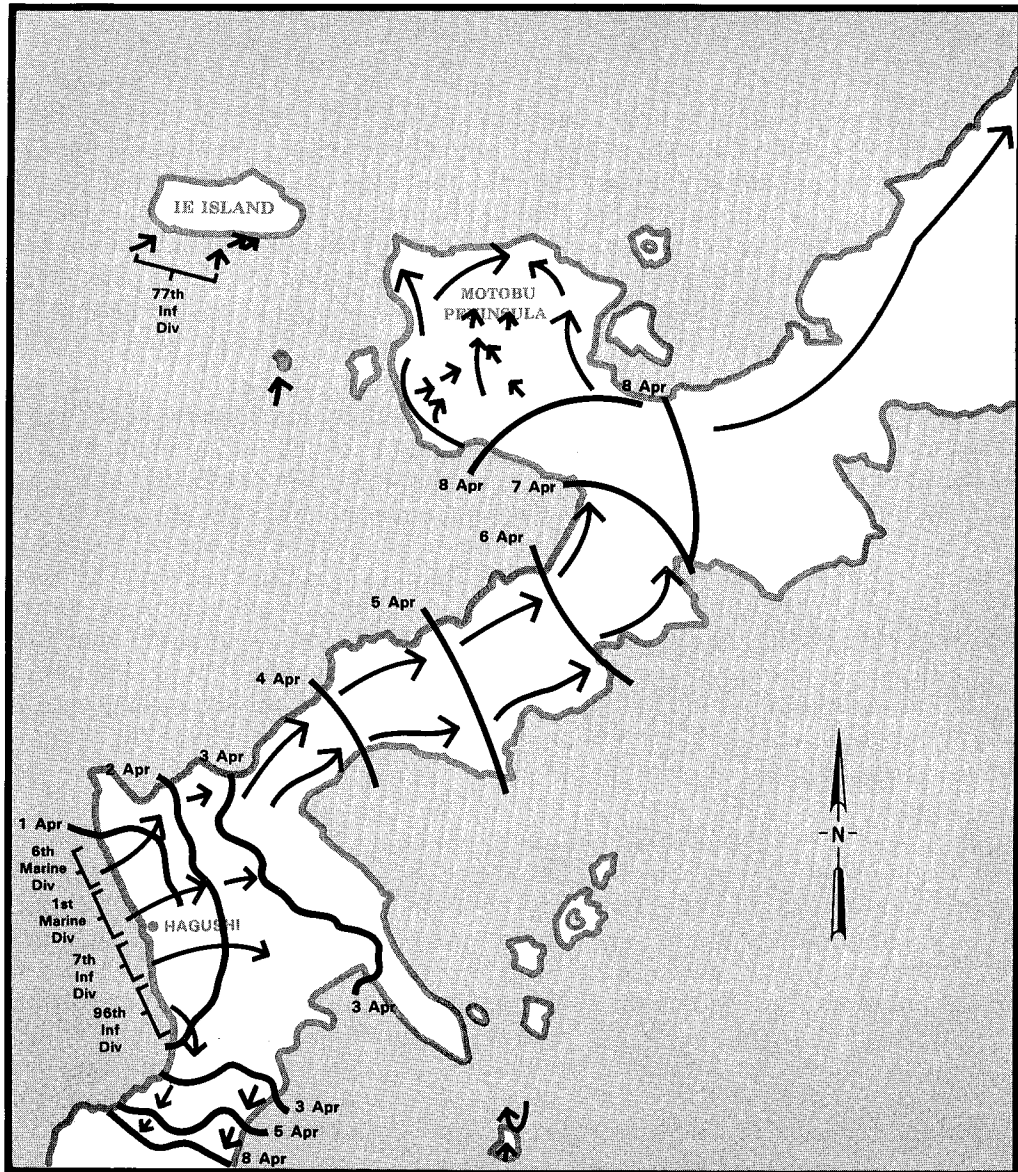
The American Landings

At 0830 on 1 April 1945, U.S. forces began to land on the Hagushi beaches (see map 4). The 32d Army believed there was a fifty-fifty chance that the Americans would land there rather than at Itoman or Minatoga. The Japanese believed the Americans would land in one place, or two at the most, since that had been their practice in the past. According to their established plan, the Japanese refrained both from firing artillery on the American beachhead and from responding to reconnaissance activities. The Americans did not expect such passivity since, even at Iwo Jima, the Japanese had directed artillery fires against the beaches.⁴

The main units of 32d Army did not stir from their underground positions in the south. Meeting the Americans around the Yontan and Kadena

airfields, however, was the IJA 1st Specially Established Regiment, a unit that had only recently been formed out of the 56th and 44th Air Base Battalions and had little combat training. The Americans captured both airfields on the first day, a disappointment to the 32d Army Staff. The 1st Specially Established Regiment suffered heavy losses and retreated to the north, where it merged with the Kunigami Detachment, under whose command it had been placed on 2 April.⁵

The 32d Army had left no forces to the north of the Hagushi beaches except for this same Kunigami Detachment, whose orders were to delay the



Map 4. Movement of U.S. forces, 1—8 April 1945



U.S. forces on Hagushi beachhead on L+3

American advance while falling back northward. A Japanese detachment was a task-organized force of less than brigade size assembled for a particular combat mission and usually named for its commander, though here named for a place (north Okinawa). A detachment was usually organized around two or more regiments, a single regiment, or a battalion. The Japanese also used permanent task-organized brigades and regiments, with organic artillery, transport, signals, and such, which were then referred to as "independent mixed brigades" and "independent mixed regiments." The Kunigami Detachment in northern Okinawa consisted of the 44th IMB's 2d Infantry Regiment less its 3d Battalion, a force of about 1,715 men (see figure 3 in chapter 1).⁶

With Americans on the Hagushi beaches and expanding easily to the north and south, the 32d Army Staff formulated a series of attacks to push them back but then curiously abandoned or limited each as soon as it was made. The 10th Area Army on Taiwan and IGHQ in Tokyo pressured 32d Army to attack and recapture the Yontan and Kadena airfields. (IGHQ communicated with 32d Army by radio telegraphy.) This advice was almost redundant, however, since attack as a battle tactic was the predominant feature of Japanese infantry doctrine. Aggressive attack was supposed to catch the enemy off guard and force an early solution. Night infiltration and close combat were supposed to offset the enemy's advantage in firepower. Attack would overcome all problems, so elements of the 32d Army Staff, echoing IGHQ's wishes, repeatedly advocated attacking American lines in the early days of April.

Having been encouraged by a radio message from the 10th Area Army to attack and fearing harm to Commander Ushijima's reputation if an

attack was not made, Chief of Staff Cho called a staff conference on the night of 3 April. He said the U.S. position was still in flux. Therefore, to annihilate this enemy, 32d Army should make a general attack immediately, relying on night infiltration and close combat, the form of fighting the IJA believed favored itself.⁷

Cho then canvassed the six staff members one by one to see if they agreed. The twelve staff men, Kumura, Jin, and the rest were junior to Cho in rank and age, being only majors and lieutenant colonels and eight to twenty years younger. These younger officers one by one enthusiastically agreed with Cho's suggestion, since it represented rock-solid IJA doctrine and since their superior was cuing them to this response. Major Jin Naomichi approved of the plan even more emphatically than the others because he was the aviation staff officer and so was eager to retake the airfields because of their importance for IGHQ's larger air and sea strategy. Only Major Nagano Hideo, an assistant strategy officer, qualified his approval somewhat.⁸

But in this atmosphere of total agreement, Operations Officer Yahara exploded against the attack policy. He spoke with the intensity of a man who knew he was right. He said that the young staff officers were agreeing to Cho's suggestions in an offhand manner, as if it were just a five-minute problem on an academy exam. He said they knew nothing of the terrain or other particular factors affecting the attack, even though this data was critical and actually had been gathered by Cho's subordinates.

They were making policy randomly, Yahara said, abandoning the policy of attrition warfare that had been carefully developed since the preceding autumn. Moreover, if they thought the Americans would be caught unprepared, that was "a complete fantasy." The Americans were already established on the beachhead, projecting orderly assault lines north and south, and would be still better organized after the three days it would take the Japanese to prepare a large-scale attack. Moving in the open under American guns would be suicidal and wreck 32d Army in a few days, which would be especially sad given the long toil preparing the elaborate tunnel positions. Besides that, he suggested, the radioed order from 10th Area Army for attack was not completely explicit, leaving local commanders some latitude to disregard it if doing so was in the army's interest on account of local circumstances.⁹

Cho heard this urgent speech to the end, saying nothing. When Yahara had finished his plea, Cho rose to his feet nonetheless and deliberately announced that the consensus of the meeting was that the staff favored attack. He recessed the group for thirty minutes, after which all officers reconvened in Lieutenant General Ushijima's office in full uniform and battle ribbons, to hear their commander request an attack by the main body of the army on the Yontan and Kadena airfields. A general attack was now the army's intention, and an attack plan in six paragraphs was drafted.¹⁰

Yahara was highly distraught over this impending waste, not only of the 32d Army but also of the past eight months of his own labors. Yahara therefore sought to lobby the various division commanders when they were briefed on the attack orders on 4 April. He urged each of them to voice opposition to the plan and did persuade one of them. The orders, however, remained in force.¹¹

The attack was not scheduled until 6 April, however, and on the night of 4 April an air unit reported to 32d Army that an American task force of three aircraft carriers and fifty transports and cargo vessels had been spotted ninety miles south of Naha. If the Americans landed at Machinato airfield, just behind the existing forward line, at the same moment as the Japanese attack, the result would be catastrophic. Yahara seized on this message and carried it to Cho, who summarily canceled the 6 April offensive that had caused the 32d Army Staff so much turmoil for the last several days.¹²

Although Yahara seemed to be a minority of one in the attack dispute, coolly discarding thirty years of IJA doctrine, it was nevertheless his point of view that prevailed in the end. The 6 April offensive was canceled and never took place. This first episode of nonattack was significant because most of 32d Army's decisions for the rest of its existence would be reached in this same stormy way: by a test of wills and words between Cho and Yahara.

The two men had different personalities. Cho was famous for physical courage, spontaneous decision, and a hearty presence that inspired confidence and friendship. Yahara was known as a sour, aloof, preoccupied intellectual. The disputes between them pitted romantic aspiration against reality and rosy doctrine against harsh fact. The most surprising feature of this turbulent decision-making process, however, was that most observers felt it produced good decisions.

Planning the Japanese 12 April Offensive

From the earliest days of the American presence up until the major Japanese offensive of 4 May, there was a continuing tendency in 32d Army to go over to the attack, with Yahara in every case trying to stem the tide. The attack impulse came from higher headquarters as well as from doctrinal habit, since the staffs of 10th Area Army on Taiwan and of IGHQ in Tokyo couched their expectations in terms of their strategic goals rather than in terms of the realities of the Okinawa field.

On the night of 5 April, when 10th Area Army heard that the 6 April offensive had been canceled, it immediately radioed that 32d Army must attack on the night of 8 April to recapture the airfields. This time the message was a specific command. Consequently, Lieutenant General Ushijima's response was to issue an order for a general attack for the night of 8 April, the order's text being similar to that of the just-canceled 6 April attack.¹³

Once again, however, on the afternoon of 7 April, an American naval group was observed moving west of Naha, causing fears of an American landing near Machinato and an advance toward Urasoe village, behind the left flank of the Japanese main line. Cho therefore modified the attack orders into only a night sortie by two companies in front of their positions, a gesture of little consequence.¹⁴

When no landings materialized, Cho instructed Yahara on 8 April to prepare a night attack for 12 April. A brigade or more would cross U.S. lines, and small units would penetrate deeply. If successful, a general attack would follow immediately. Two young staff officers, Kimura and Kusumaru, who had served in China, thought a night penetration of six miles was possible. Yahara thought it was the height of folly but prepared the plan in his usual businesslike way.¹⁵

The American Advance

Meanwhile, the Americans had moved four divisions onto the Hagushi beaches (see map 4). By 3 April they had secured most of the Hagushi landmass, and their southern perimeter crossed the isthmus at Futema. By 8 April, the Americans had pushed the Kunigami Detachment northward as far as the Motobu Peninsula and the Gaya Detachment southward back into the Japanese main line (the Gaya Detachment was a small force sent out, like its counterpart, the Kunigami, to delay the U.S. advance).¹⁶

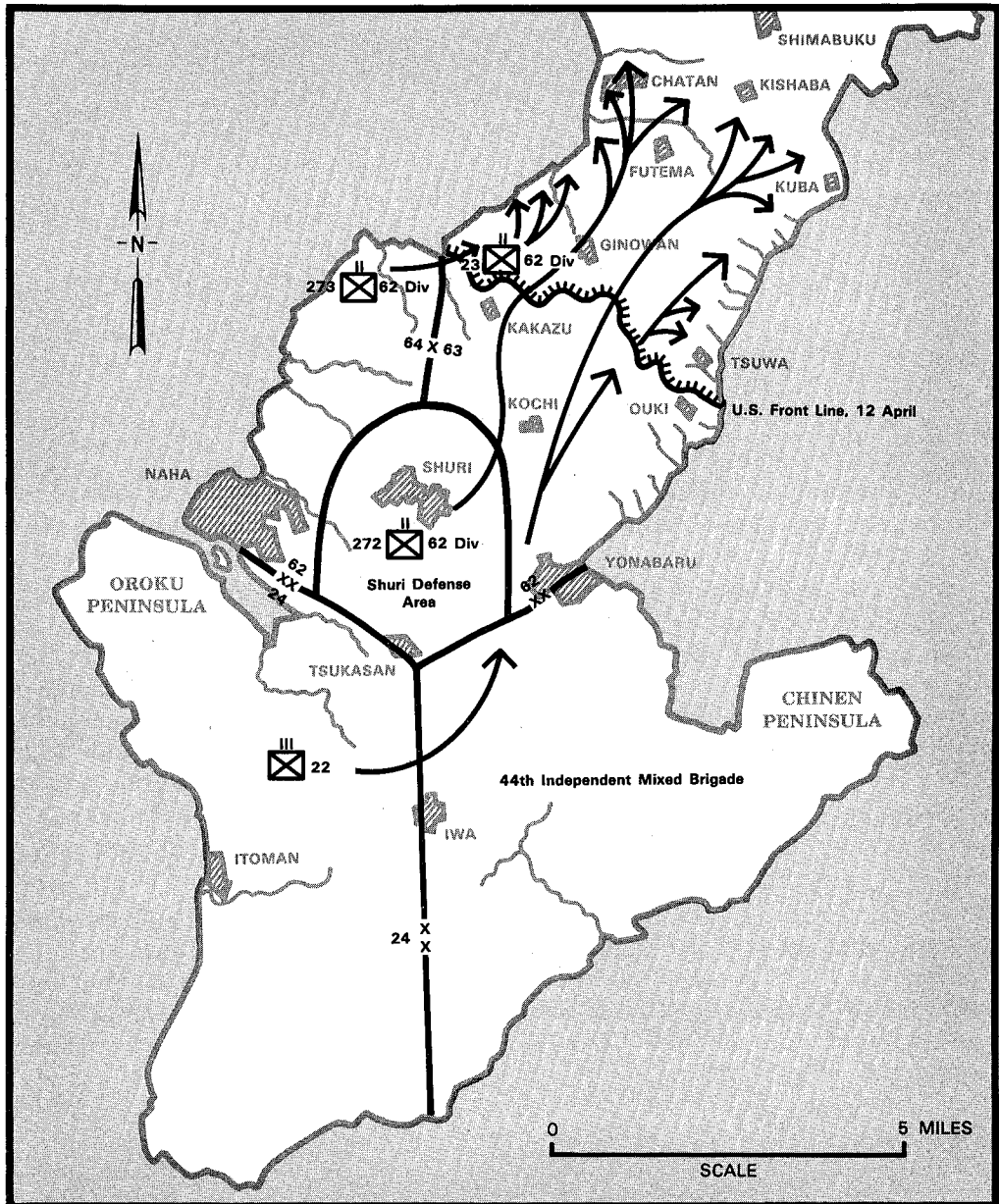
The U.S. 1st and 6th Marine Divisions were able to secure all of Motobu Peninsula by 20 April, despite stubborn resistance by remnants of the Kunigami Detachment on Yae-Take Mountain. This meant that the two-thirds of Okinawa north of the Hagushi beachhead was all essentially pacified by that date. Only a few Kunigami troops remained in the hills until the end of the campaign. Meanwhile, from 16 to 22 April, the U.S. 77th Infantry Division was securing Ie Island from its defenders (part of the Kunigami Detachment).¹⁷

However, the Americans' easy advance toward the south ended on 8 April. The main struggle on Okinawa would take place on the southern isthmus where, on 8 April, the U.S. 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions were just pushing up against the main Japanese line for the first time. This arrival happened while the Japanese still debated whether to attack, and it had two important consequences for the Japanese operational situation. One was that the units of the IJA 62d Division that manned the main line were engaged and could not easily move for an attack. The other was that now it was not necessary to attack to achieve the close combat IJA favored, because the Americans had obligingly provided this circumstance by moving forward.

The Japanese 12 April Offensive

The U.S. 7th and 96th Infantry Divisions kept steady pressure on the Japanese isthmus line from 9 April on, while preparing for a major offen-

sive thrust that would begin on 19 April. At the 32d Army Staff headquarters, the plans for the Japanese 12 April attacks went forward. The units of the IJA 62d Division already on the isthmus line were to hold. The IJA 22d Infantry Regiment was to be brought north from the Oroku area, placed under 62d Division's command, and assembled northeast of Shuri. At sunset, the 22d was to attack through the U.S. lines on the east of the Ginowan Road, then advance as far as Shimabuku (see map 5).¹⁸



Map 5. Plan for the IJA's 12 April offensive

The 62d Division was to use three reserve battalions from its own rear areas—the 23d, 272d, and 273d—for the sunset assault. The 273d Battalion was to attack along the west coast, the 272d was to advance along the west side of the Ginowan Road, and the 23d was to move forward between them. The 32d Army artillery was to provide covering fire beginning at sunset, with fires briefly directed at the American line, then shifted to American rear areas.¹⁹



West end of the Kakazu-Ouki crest line that was fortified by IJA 32d Army across the Okinawa isthmus' whole width

The orders drafted by Yahara were handed to subordinate commands on the night of 10 April and were carried out on schedule on the evening of 12 April. In the event, the rightmost assault unit, the IJA 22d Infantry Regiment, failed to move forward because of unfamiliar terrain or perhaps it simply got lost in the darkness.²⁰ The 23d and 272d Battalions, moving on the west side of the Ginowan Road, penetrated 1,000 yards behind the U.S. lines but were isolated after dawn on 13 April. When these units retreated into the Japanese lines that night, only half of their men had survived. The 273d Battalion, moving up the west coast, fared worse still, since the entire unit was lost.²¹

Given the poor results, Ushijima ordered the offensive suspended on 13 April. Moreover, it developed that Senior Staff Officer Yahara, who had opposed the offensive, had told the 62d Division commander to commit only a few troops to the attack since it was bound to fail. Though events proved Yahara right, his conduct has been criticized as undermining the normal structure of command.²²

Night Problems

The night attacks suffered from several unexpected problems. Heavy shelling had changed the landscape, blasting away villages and thickets,

so that even though night infiltrators knew their maps and thought they knew the terrain, they lacked the landmarks needed to tell them where they actually were. Moreover, frequent illumination shells forced the eyes of night infiltrators to adjust so many times that their capacity to adjust was lost. They became temporarily blinded and so were unable to move.²³

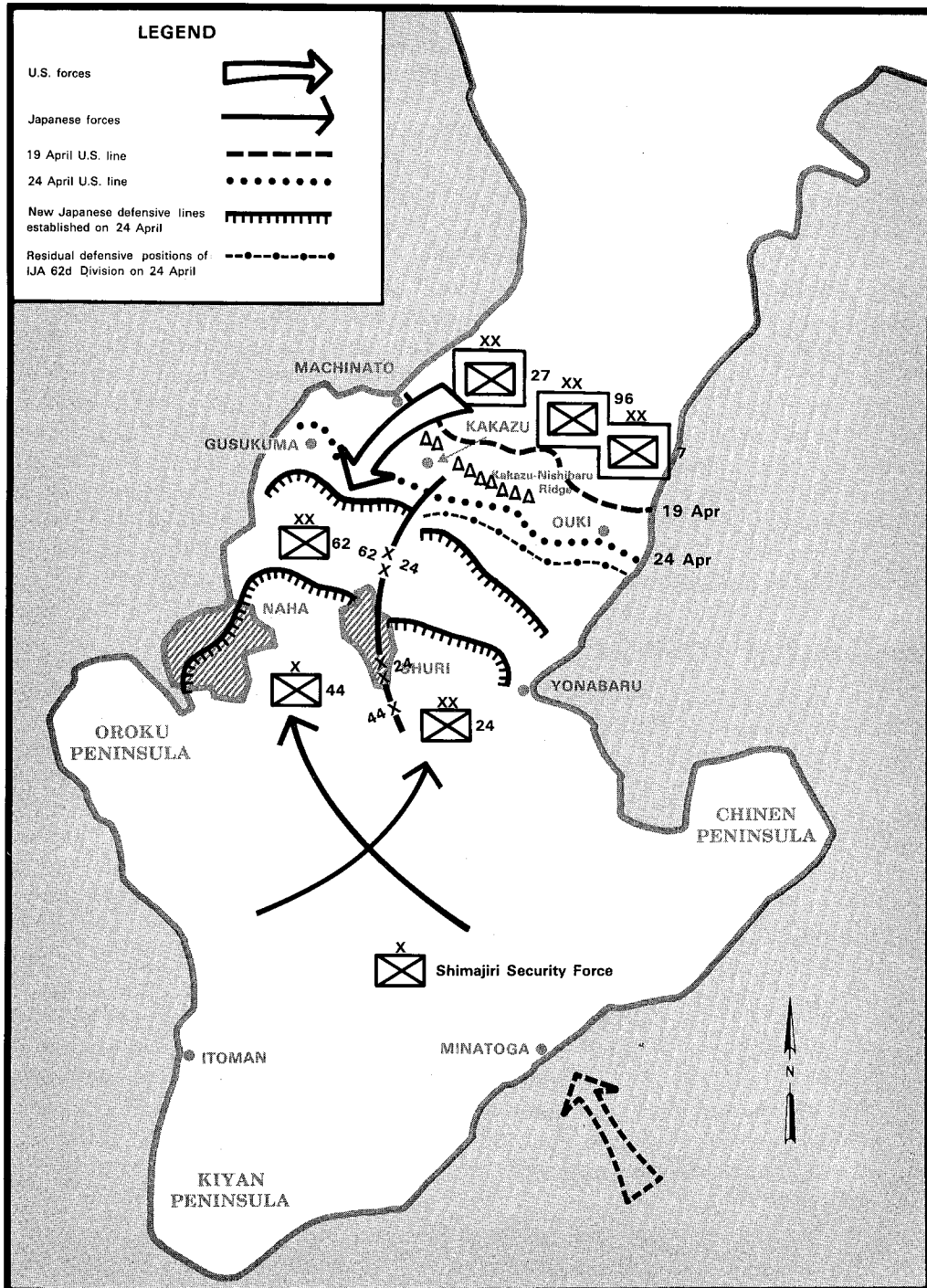
Because of the unfamiliar terrain and flash blindness, the Japanese night fighters had difficulty reaching their assigned objectives. In fact, it was hard for them to reach their jumping-off points. Continuous naval bombardment of crossroads and bridges forced units to rush across in small groups between shells so that the units became strung out on the roads and difficult to control. It was hard to move heavy ammunition and supplies forward because of these interdiction points and the generally churned up roads. Even when units reached their northward assembly points safely by night, they were immediately exposed to aerial observation and artillery fire at dawn, since they lacked enough time to dig in. Units that attacked across American lines safely in darkness had the same problem: they lacked time to dig in and so were utterly exposed to artillery fire at morning light. Night attacks, like flanking maneuver, were a kind of cure-all in prewar Japanese doctrine. But they failed to provide the expeditious results on Okinawa that IJA doctrine had led the 32d Army Staff to expect.²⁴

Moving the Army North

On 19 April, U.S. Army's XXIV Corps launched the major offensive it had been preparing for ten days along the whole Kakazu-Ouki line (see map 6). The IJA 62d Division, which held this line and had suffered in the 12 April attacks, was becoming increasingly weakened, to the point where the whole 32d Army Staff agreed it would soon collapse. The 62d Division had already been ordered, after the 12 April offensive, to put its reserve units on the line so that each of the 62d's thinned battalions could shorten its front. By 19 April, the 62d Division had lost 35 percent of its personnel and 39 percent of its artillery.²⁵

After four days of the new American offensive, 62d Division still held firm but had been pushed back one-half mile from its 19 April positions. In hard fighting it had relinquished Nishibaru Ridge in the center and the neighboring ridges on its right. The 62d Division was most undermined, however, by the U.S. 27th Infantry Division's penetration on the Japanese left. By aggressive and persistent advances, the 27th had thrust a salient into the Japanese line just east of Gusukuma village, thus isolating the Japanese forces on the western coastal heights from the rest of the Japanese line.²⁶

By 22 April, the IJA 62d Division had lost half of its original strength and was nearly broken through on the left. Operations Officer Yahara was in a quandary over this. He estimated that for every battalion, field gun, and mortar the 62d Division had on the line, the U.S. XXIV Corps had 4, not to mention the 100 tanks and 640 aircraft Yahara calculated to be at XXIV Corps' disposal.²⁷



Map 6. The IJA positions as of 25 April 1945



Eastern portion of the Kakazu-Ouki crest line. IJA forces lost this strong defensive position in heavy fighting after 19 April and tried to restore it on 4 May.



Americans approaching the Nishibaru Ridge in the center of the IJA Kakazu-Ouki line, still intact as of 19 April

In pondering the Americans' next move, however—Yahara's constant preoccupation—he judged that the U.S. Tenth Army had six divisions ashore, of which only the 27th, 96th, and 7th Infantry Divisions were deployed on the Kakazu-Ouki line. As he considered the operational facts from the American viewpoint, Yahara was convinced that it was in the Americans' best interest to use amphibious envelopment and land a force of a division or more on Okinawa's southeast coast at Minatoga. This would force Japanese combat units to fight on two fronts and could lead to an early collapse of the overextended Japanese perimeter. The U.S. Tenth Army did, in fact, send escorted transports to the Minatoga coast on 19 April to threaten a landing.²⁸

For the IJA 24th Division to be facing the southwest coast and the 44th IMB to be facing the southeast coast was an ideal arrangement to counter a second American front, but they could not be left there because the Japanese 62d Division line in the north was itself about to disintegrate. So Yahara developed two alternatives to the present Japanese dispositions. One was to move the 24th Division and 44th IMB to the north to reinforce the 62d Division line. The other alternative was to abandon the northern line and draw the 32d Army into three strongpoints in the Shuri, Kiyan, and Chinen areas. Both approaches would shorten the perimeter being defended.²⁹

Yahara felt on the whole that moving the bulk of IJA forces to the northern line was the sounder course, but he was dismayed still by the prospect of an American landing in the rear. He was so uncertain that he took all of these problems to Lieutenant General Cho on 22 April and asked him what to do. It is a measure of his consternation that this was the only time he ever consulted Cho about operations.³⁰

Cho said without hesitation that the 32d Army would be lost if the 62d Division were not reinforced immediately. So 24th Division and 44th IMB must be moved north for that purpose. If the Americans landed in the south, the Japanese would address that when it happened. "A man who chases two rabbits won't catch either one," he added, quoting the Japanese proverb. Cho's decision was quick and clear, which made moving the troops north seem to be obviously the right course. Cho had a decisive confidence and radiated this to the staff around him. His cutting the knot put Yahara's tormented mind at ease. To reach the right answers quickly without worrying about them too much was Cho's forte. Yahara was grateful.³¹

Since the IJA 62d Division line was so badly pocked, Yahara decided to use only part of the reinforcements, elements of the IJA 24th Division, to take over the right half of the 62d Division's line, while using the rest of the reinforcements to form a solid, fresh defense line a mile to the rear. The 24th Division was to hold the line from Shuri eastward and the 44th IMB was to hold it from Shuri westward, deploying behind the 62d Division. This would allow defense of the forward line to be continuous and, at the same time, provide a still unencroached defensive position in the rear into which retreating forces could fall back gradually. The southern areas would

be manned only by a so-called Shimajiri Security Force of 5,500 men, created out of rear-area supply units. Its job was to delay any American thrust from the south until main-force units could return to the area.³²

By the night of 24 April, the 24th Division and the 44th IMB had moved into their new northern positions. The American forces were completely unaware of the concealed night movements of these units. In the next few days, however, Japanese soldiers on the line were seen with 24th Division markings, revealing to the Americans that at least some of the IJA 24th Division had moved up from the south. For the Americans, IJA operations on the northern line were only too continuous. They remained unaware that the Japanese had faced a grave operational dilemma. To U.S. Tenth Army, the only visible phenomenon was the constant, smooth functioning of the resistance line in front of them.³³

Even so, the U.S. Tenth Army actually was considering whether to land on the Minatoga coast at almost the same moment Yahara was agonizing over that possibility. The idea was advanced not by the U.S. Tenth Army staff but by field commanders of the still unengaged units. Major General Andrew Bruce, commander of the U.S. 77th Infantry Division, urged as the Ie Island fighting was ending that his division be landed on the Minatoga beaches, behind the Japanese main line, rather than merely being fed on line in the north. The 77th Infantry Division had had success with such a maneuver on Leyte when it landed at Ormoc behind Japanese lines. (Yahara was also nervously aware of the recent Leyte precedent.)

Lieutenant General Simon Bolivar Buckner and the U.S. Tenth Army staff rejected Bruce's request, however, on the grounds that the Minatoga beaches were too constricted to stage provisions and ordnance adequately, even for a single division. The steep terrain near the beaches favored the defense, and any unit there would be isolated. It might be more like Anzio than Leyte, he suggested. Besides that, the three divisions on the line needed to be relieved, and Buckner's three unused divisions would all be needed there.³⁴ When it was determined about 26 April that the entire IJA 24th Division was on the northern line, Major General John R. Hodge, commander of XXIV Corps, went to the U.S. Tenth Army staff and advocated a landing at Minatoga, as Major General Bruce had, since Japanese defenses there were thin. The Tenth Army staff officers again rejected the proposal, just as Buckner had a few days before, and for similar reasons.³⁵

Buckner's decision not to open a second front in the south was, and remains, controversial. It is still not clear whether a division landed at Minatoga would have caused the Japanese perimeter to collapse early, or merely have caused the gradual attrition phenomenon to take place on a different terrain, or even have resulted in a U.S. division's being pinned down on a hostile beach. The workaday calculations of the Tenth Army staff may have been correct. The Japanese forces, even at the end of May, were still able to move the six miles between northern and southern fronts unobserved and within a few days. The U.S. forces at Minatoga would have had no developed rear areas to draw on and would soon have faced defense

caves reoccupied by the IJA 24th Division. The IJA 5th Artillery Command, placed on interior lines, could have brought its full weight to bear on Minatoga without moving away from the northern front. But the U.S. XXIV Corps artillery, located north of the Shuri line, could not have reached Minatoga to cover a U.S. division there (though abundant naval artillery could have been used). All in all, Buckner's judgment may have been right.

Yahara had trouble anticipating Buckner's decision because of two considerations that loomed large for Buckner but not for Yahara. One was that Buckner's staff members had a practical sense of the terrain needed to support the Americans' high-volume logistics so that they, but not Yahara, could see those conditions did not exist at Minatoga. The other factor was that Buckner was aware of how worn American line units were becoming in continuous combat on the isthmus line, something that had not occurred to Yahara.
