

# Okinawa, Shima, Ryukya Islands

Selection from the Memoirs of

## Ltn. George Kern

JASCO Unit U.S. Navy

Attached to the 3rd Battalion 383rd Regiment 96th Division



Back to the Line-Tech 5  
Woody Martin and George Kern,  
near Conical Hill, May '45

## Okinawa Shima, Ryukyu Islands

None of us spear-carriers knew, of course, what the new invasion target would be until we were aboard ship. The destination thought likely, by most, was Formosa, although the China coast was also a possibility. We found out eventually that our operation would be directed at the island of Okinawa, with the code name of “Iceberg.” The island had been “annexed” by Japan many years before, which made it the southernmost island of the official Empire.

Routine preparations got underway energetically. As for every previous training exercise and attack, every item that would go through the surf had to be water proofed. Jeeps and trucks, for example were equipped with four-foot vertical “snorkels” connected to carburetors for air intake, and all electrical and other water-sensitive parts were coated with “cosmoline.” Service equipment had to be palletized for delivery after the initial amphibious phase; everything was prioritized for combat loading.

The JASCO liaison teams, Naval Gunfire and Air, would be assigned for the most part to the same units of the 96th Division with which we’d participated in the Leyte landings last October. Signal Corps would again establish ship-shore combat unit communications on the beach. The 96th, however, was still fighting in mop-up operations into February, 1945.

Training was even more important than the ship-loading preparations, so we soon were involved in boarding, debarking and landing maneuvers. I was very pleased to rejoin the 3rd Battalion of the 383rd rd Regimental Combat Team, as we’d spent a lot of time together in Southern California, Hawaii, and in the Leyte assault. There was no need to go through the Kabuki dance of getting acquainted and test out one another. My forward observer, 2nd Lt. Warren Clark, was assigned elsewhere and a new man, 1st Lt. Richard Grand come on as his replacement.

The grand scheme of “Operation Iceberg” included two Army Divisions, the 96th and the 7th of the XXIV Corps and two Marine Divisions, the 1st and 6th of the III Amphibious Corps. The overall commander was Admiral Chester Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), not General Mac Arthur, whose area of responsibility lay to the south. The four divisions under General Simon Bolivar Buckner, U. S. Army, would land abreast on the west side of the island, with the 96th on the right, the 7th was to drive straight across the narrow neck (say a half dozen miles) of the island to split the enemy forces, while the Marine divisions turned north to clean up the lightly defended northern region.

On embarkation day those of our units who were to participate in the early landing waves waded out to climb up the bow ramps of the LSTs, which were beached in the same general area where we came ashore at the invasion of Leyte the previous October. Lt. Col. Stare and his key staff were aboard, as well as the rifle company and related specialists and move in on the second wave. The well deck contained the amphibious tractors, which would take us to the beach.

The large convoy of LSTs, transports and escorting Navy fighting ships departed from Leyte Gulf, setting a northerly course, toward our objective, only 300 miles south of the major Japanese city of Kyushu. From our embarkation beaches to Okinawa was perhaps 1200 miles or so by airline distance.

During the voyage of almost a week, we were finally flooded with information about the operation --- meetings and training sessions and orientations about the island. “L” Day was set for April 1st, April Fool’s Day, and also Easter Sunday that year. It was also my date of promotion to Lieutenant, junior grade!

The island is about 67 miles long and varies greatly in width from about 3 miles up to 10 or 15, and at about 26 degrees north latitude it is well north of the tropic belt where we’d spent our time the last 8 months.

We were warned that the island harbored a species of venomous snakes and that the area regularly experienced typhoons coming out of the China Sea. I didn't see any of the former, but the 10th Army soon found that the latter would present serious problems.

The "L" (Love) Day was pleasant and the ocean wasn't rough. The fleet was huge and awe inspiring. The Navy was pounding the landing areas and inland with virtually every gun. It had total air superiority. Assault landing personnel made their way below to the tank deck, my team and I climbing into the amphibious tractor (LVT Landing Vehicle, Tracked) that would carry Col. Stare and his CP personnel. T-5 Henry Owens would drive our jeep ashore later when the beach was secured. There was a huge amount of ding from banging equipment and clattering tank tracks in that confined hold. Soon the great bow doors opened and the wide landing ramp lowered, and the racket reverberated even more like a boiler factory as the LVTs lumbered through the tank deck and down the ramp and into the sea. Our group of LVTs headed for the Line of Departure, forming on the way.

The following is from a letter home, written weeks later. (Please see the image of this page to read this first paragraph as the letter is too cluttered with a map to transcribe that part.)

I didn't see a living soul on the beach other than our soldiers. The little town of stone-and-thatch houses was still burning vigorously from the intense naval bombardment. We thought we had hit another Luzon that afternoon --- still no resistance, and the next day we thought the same.

The third Day we abruptly had our minds changed. (my regimental NLO, Lt. Fred Borchard, had been wounded by a sniper on the first day and was evacuated Stateside; he was replaced by Lt (j.g.) Mike Meisinger). I was up for forward in another little hamlet several miles south of the landing spot with Col. Stare and a few other people at his OP (Observation Post). About 100 feet from where we were standing an explosion went off with a startling roar. Probably only a 105 millimeter gun but it sounded much louder -- we knew we were at last under fire.

1st Lt. Richard Grand, my new forward observer, had joined up with me since the battalion OP was up so close to the line companies. His jeep was handy so we jumped into it and drove forward toward some visual shelter to try to spot the enemy artillery and bring naval gunfire to bear.

The coastal road broke into the open into a plain, open toward the sea on the right and with rugged hills on the left. We saw a long low tone wall, along with some broken trees, slanted down to the right. Behind is a squad or so of dogfaces crouched, under fire from the hills. A shell hit near the jeep -- we both dived out for cover and I scrambled over a four-foot high stone wall and into one of the islanders' ubiquitous goat pens. It was full of dirty straw and ubiquitous fleas. The whole episode only lasted a few seconds.

Crouching in the goat pen for quite a while, the sharp odor of cordite thick in the air, I knew I had to get out of there -- it may have been only a single gun firing, but very little time passed between each shell burst. I took a quick look, but didn't see Grand -- he'd probably have sought cover to the rear by now, I figured.

Necessarily taking another look toward where the doggies were, they were pulling back to better cover from the very inadequate shelter of the stone wall. By ones and twos they were racing over the open ground behind them as fast and deceptively as possibly. It looked like a good idea and I was closer to getting back to the tree-line than they were.

I hiked back to where the OP had been, then had to track down where it had been moved. Grand had not returned yet. My team got radio contact over our jeep radio and our support ship, which I think was the old West Virginia, repaired and re-floated after Pearl Harbor. I gave the Gunnery Officer the best educated guess I could make as to the map coordinates of the Jap artillery in the hills but was unable to give spotting directions. I couldn't see where they were since I'd left the goat

pen. Anyway, the ship blasted that whole hillside with their biggest guns.

No one had seen Lt. Grand. It was at least a day later that I found out he'd been wounded, and recovered by medics from that no-man's land. It was a considerable time later that I heard that he was hurt badly and evacuated to a hospital ship, where he died of his wounds. Why no one sent word up to the lines I never knew. I took it very hard, and the fear that had surged through me during that experience I sensed all over again. We'd hardly had time to get acquainted in the short period he's been transferred into the outfit.

More from the aforementioned letter home:

The rifle companies moved out forward each morning with a determination achieved from I don't know where. Battalion CP and others slept in a Jap cave forty feet under the earth surface for three nights and rocks tumbled down the access hole from the impact of Jap shells -- (the battalion) bore most of the brunt of the offensive of the whole 10th Army during the first two weeks or more.

The 7th Division had crossed the island opposite the landing beaches, then turned south with Nakagusaku Wan (Later named Buckner Bay) on its left and in contact with the 96th on its right. Both divisions met heavy enemy resistance of all kinds as they came up against the first major rank of east-west hills and cliffs. All the enemy's defense tools were now brought to bear: sniper, machine guns, mortar, artillery, night infiltration, and so fourth. Ridge after ridge, hill after hill, most of the forbiddingly steep, blanked with Jap defenses well organized, so that each of his firing positions was supported by several others.

There were many caves, man-made as protection against the recurring typhoons. The Jap defenders expanded the caves by miles into elaborate interlocking systems with occasional sortie openings on the northern side, facing the American Army, artfully camouflaged. Their

defensive positions were anchored on the southern, or “reverse,” slopes so that it was very difficult for our artillery and tanks to be spotted in on specific targets. They could move a weapon out of a cave, fire a few rounds and duck back in. Our tanks were quite vulnerable in the rugged terrain, which greatly reduced their ability to maneuver.

The 383rd ran up against heavily fortified Cactus Hill; the 3rd Bn. was so far out in front down the west coast that it was ordered to pull back to prevent a possible hit on its left flank. We were able to give some good naval gunfire support with enfilading fire with our ship positioned off the coast, ahead of our troops. The regiment received many casualties, mainly, mainly to the 2nd Bn. over the next few days in taking Cactus -- it was only the beginning of two and a half months of slow advance and deadly fighting.

The infantry rifle companies of course too the heavy impact of the fighting and the next Nip strongpoint would be one of the toughest targets of the whole campaign. Kakazu Ridge ran east-west, with a knob at the west end, and a long deep depression running across its northern base for its whole length. The 1st Bn. on the east and center and the 3rd Bn. on the right, jumped off before dawn on April 9th. The ridge and its environs had been pounded by Army artillery and air strikes as well as naval gunfire for several days.

Two companies from the 1st Bn. reached the top of the ridge but immediately caught intense fire from mortars and machine guns, which had been zeroed in earlier. Their cover was minimal, they couldn't go forward and were under orders not to pull out -- but they had to finally and moved back down the ridge after dark, carrying the dead and wounded with them.

From the 3rd Bn./ 383rd I Company under 1st Lt A.E. Von Holle and L Company under 1st Lt. “Hoss” Mitchell had moved out at the same early hour toward Kakazu West. Von's company had gotten slowed up some how and was detected after dawn broke, coming under

enemy fire so intense it was impossible to move before they'd even gotten to the gorge at the base of the ridge.

Hoss' company got through the gorge and well up the hill before being noticed but was subjected to every kind of weapon the enemy had. He and his G.I.s, whom he affectionately referred to as his "lard-asses", dug in on top of the ridge in a shallow swell, under fire all day long with hardly any letup. Banzai charges with swords, pistols, hand grenades and rocks were interspersed with the other fire. Late in the afternoon, with ammo nearly gone and his troops having sustained heavy casualties, Hoss call for smoke projectiles to obscure the companies' withdrawal, which it accomplished in good order, due to great degree to the nerve of the few soldiers of their rear guard.

L Company's ordeal is well recounted in "The Story of the 96th Division" and other publications. Paraphrasing this book, of 89 men who jumped off in the assault, only 3, including Hoss were unscratched.

Seventeen were dead or missing, 37 wounded so badly they had to be carried out -- but 165 enemy bodies were left on the hill. The 383rd Regiment had suffered 326 casualties on that day alone.

Von was an excellent infantry company commander and later won a Silver Star in the Okinawa campaign and promotion to captain, but Hoss was the hero of that day, however.

He was a good ol' southern boy, husky bordering on burly, and born for soldiering leadership. He was on of those little bit bigger than life -- extroverted, a good story teller, and a good company all around. His account of the April 9th battle was fascinating, but he wound up in his Louisiana drawl, "...when Ah git back hum, Ah'm gonna buy me a li'l ol' shack in a strawberry patch an' jes set on ma rocka on ma po'ch an' rare back." He'd been a football player at some obscure Mississippi college, and surely that physically competitive experience contributed to the persona that impressed his men. As to his nickname, it was much more in character than his given name of Willard.



The 383rd Bn. was ordered to shift to the left, to let the fresher 381st RCT take over on the right flank of the Army. My team had been able to deliver substantial assistance from our support ships off the west shore. We now moved easterly without our jeep -- the terrain was too rough and any vehicle was a target -- keeping to-cover as far as possible. Suddenly spotted flying from the direction of Kakazu was what looked like a circus human cannonball, floating seemingly in slow motion, in a high long arc directly toward us. Freezing for a moment in astonishment, we hit the deck just as a tremendous roar and flying rocks and dirt clods filled the air from 50-75 yards away. We'd seen, too close up, a convincing demonstration of the power of a 320 mm. spigot mortar, over a foot in diameter and packed with explosives.

That night we dug in at the edge of the Bn. perimeter in another hamlet, making good use of the typical stone walls. Once it was dark no one would want to move out of his foxhole. Everyone was extremely conscious of the possibility of infiltration moves by a few Jap volunteers. Later that dark night, I heard a noise from quite close and forward. I reached my 45 from the shoulder holster made for me on Leyte by a Filipino, chambered a round and peeked over the edge of my hole. The hole was so narrow that I couldn't straighten out my arm, at that instant a figure spring up running from the bushes nearby. I squeezed off the trigger, creating a big boom in the silent darkness, and at the same split second causing the automatic slide to kickback and hit me near the nose almost knocking me out. Nose and cheek were sore for days, but that was the only fallout from the event. All these guys were experienced soldiers by now and held their fire for seen targets. My target had kept moving fast: clad in civilian clothes, he may have been a Nip or possibly a local just trying to escape the "American Devils" he'd heard about in the propaganda, but I don't think so.

Parenthetically, here's similar event of a week or two later, as reported in the "Deadeye Dispatch":  
Lt. Col. Stare ... keeps his CP close up to the front lines with his dough-guys. IN the dark early morning a Jap crawled into his foxhole. Sgt.

Dowling ... spotted him, raised his rifle and fired... Blood from the Jap's wound ..in to the Colonel's face .(but he) grabbed the Jap ...and tossed him out ...Sgt. Dowling let go with two more shots that rendered him a "good Jap."

For the next several days the three regiments of the 96th continued attacks. I and K companies of the 383rd went after the center of Kakazu, the 381st at Kakazu west, the 382rd on the Tombstone Ridge. These united found some of the toughest opposition of the war in the Pacific. It was determined later there were 110,000 Japanese troops and conscripted civilians on the island, almost all of them in front of them to the south. The Nip defense centered on the stronghold of Shuri Castle on the highest point of the entire area, protected by ranks of rugged hills and deep valleys. His forces were fresh, confident and in their minds invincible at that time.

I and K took more pounding as did the others. By April 15th the 383rd ranks were so thin that it was squeezed out and relieved for regrouping as the newly arrived 27th Division moved into the line. It would be another week and a half before Kakaru was outflanked and made impotent.

The 383rd Regiment alone suffered more than 400 killed and twice as many wounded, of which many would be handicapped the rest of their lives. However, the 383rd and its companion regiments had softened up a huge part of the line of defense for the next attack. The 381st and the 382nd were still in the line and would be for another week or more.