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THE BATTLE FOR OKINAWA:  
A DIRECT APPROACH FOR DIRECT DEFEAT

CORE COURSE II ESSAY

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# Report Documentation Page

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**THE BATTLE FOR OKINAWA:  
A DIRECT APPROACH TO DIRECT DEFEAT**

"The perfection of strategy would be, . . . . ., to produce  
a decision without any serious fighting."

B.H. LIDDELL HART

Yet, throughout the fall of 1944 and early spring of 1945, the Japanese defenders of Okinawa prepared a defensive battle strategy that resulted in Japanese defeat and the most casualties for both forces in any single battle of the Pacific Campaign. Lieutenant General Mitsuru Ushijima, Commander of the Thirty-second Army defending Okinawa, formulated a direct approach strategy based on defensive positions strategically situated to confront head-on the brunt of the Allies main attack. This approach aimed at prolonging each action to the utmost, while inflicting maximum casualties. The result would be the defeat of Allied forces through Japanese will power and Allied attrition. (Nicholas, 48)

The Allies' decision to capture Okinawa was originally seen as a political compromise between the differing views of General MacArthur (Commander, US Forces Pacific) and Admiral King (Chief of Naval Operations) on how the Pacific war should be prosecuted. Despite this compromise, both Commanders saw clearly the strategic importance of Okinawa in the overall context of the war effort.

Okinawa lies only 350 miles from mainland Japan and almost equal distance from Formosa and the China coast. Its capture by Allied forces would give them numerous sites for airfields from which almost any aircraft could reach the industrial areas of Japan. The island's indented coast line offered the best fleet anchorage's in the Western Pacific, and its size and location would make it an excellent staging area for further operations against mainland Japan. Moreover, if the Allies decided not to launch an invasion on the Japanese homeland, occupation of Okinawa would permit American naval and air power to control the East China Sea and its adjacent waters, to include approaches to Korea, Manchuria, Formosa, and the North China coast. (Isely, 533)

Applying B.H. Liddell Hart's Theory of the Indirect Approach, this paper examines the Japanese defensive plan in terms of LtGen Ushijima's failure to develop a scheme of battle based upon the enemy's strategy and disposition of forces. It will specifically examine the Thirty-second Army's plan for concentration of forces--as well as the absence of maneuver and surprise--in view of Hart's concepts of dispersion of forces, dissolution, and diminishment of resistance fighting. To systematically analyze each area, I will discuss a thesis (Hart's concept), antithesis (Japanese plan), and synthesis (LtGen Ushijima's plan, using Hart's theory). Before examining Hart's theory, I will briefly discuss each force's strategic plan, and its place in the overall context of the war in the Pacific.

**THE BATTLE FOR OKINAWA, APRIL THROUGH JUNE, 1945.**

The Japanese planned to make Okinawa a veritable fortress. The most favorable defensive terrain was occupied and honeycombed with mutually supporting gun positions and protected connecting tunnels. By using complex barriers and defending from extensive underground positions, the Japanese hoped to channel the Allies into prepared fire lanes and preplanned impact areas on the Southern third of the island. Landings north of these areas were not to be opposed. Landings south of the line would be met at the beaches. LtGen Ushijima surmised that by concentrating his forces to the South, he could prolong the battle and inflict as many casualties as possible, ultimately resulting in the Allies abandoning the operation. (USSB(Pac), 426-427)

American intelligence correctly plotted the general layout of the enemy's island defenses and relative strength. (Nicholas, 19-22) Due to this analysis, a large-scale amphibious feint was planned for the island's southwest beaches. A successful feint would make a relatively unopposed amphibious landing possible near the central portion of the island. Once ashore, the Allies would sever the island in half, sending one attack force to the South and another to the North. All organic shipping and aircraft were to be destroyed in the first few days of the battle, resulting in the only Japanese naval and aviation support for LtGen Ushijima located 300 miles away on mainland Japan.

What followed was the largest and costliest battle of the Southern Pacific. American forces, fighting foot by foot against

a concentrated and well-fortified enemy defense, took three months to secure the island.

With this sketch of the overall battle, I will now examine the failed Japanese plan in light of Hart's Theory of the Indirect Approach, focusing on his concepts of dispersion of forces, dissolution, and diminishment of resistance fighting.

**CONCEPT: DISPERSION OF FORCES**

**THESIS:** Hart writes that there is a paradox between true concentration and dispersion. Concentration is achieved when the opposing forces are dispersed. To achieve dispersion of the enemy, one's own forces must be dispersed. (Hart, 329) Hart postulates that by dispersing a force, the distributed units can combine to aid each other to produce the maximum force at one place, while the minimum force necessary is used elsewhere to enable the concentration. He argues--contrary to Clausewitz and Jomini--that concentrating all the forces at the right time is unrealistic and even dangerous. (Hart, 329)

**ANTITHESIS:** LtGen Ushijima concentrated his main force on the southern section of the island, confident that each action would inflict enormous casualties on the enemy. He ignored Hart's principle of dispersion and its underlining theme that the larger the force used to distract the enemy, the greater the chance of concentration succeeding. The Thirty-second Army was so grossly concentrated in the South, American forces were able to sever the island in half, effectively cutting lines of communication and reinforcement. By not dispersing his forces through the central

part of the island and opposing the beach assault, LtGen Ushijima virtually cut off any supporting assault he could count on from the North. Additionally, the concentrated and entrenched defensive positions severely limited any options for offensive maneuver. Since Okinawa's naval and air forces were no longer available, American forces could concentrate their combined firepower into one large zone of action. This enabled the Allies to attack on a concentrated front, free from enemy rear or flanking attacks. It also freed up rear areas for relatively unobstructed logistic resupply and airfield operations.

**SYNTHESIS:** Despite concentrating his forces on one end of the island and leaving little room for tactical maneuver, LtGen Ushijima managed to inflict heavy losses on the Allies. Credit for these losses can be attributed to his plan for well entrenched fortifications and overlapping fields of fire. A more effective strategy, however, would have been to combine LtGen Ushijima's defensive plan with Hart's concept of dispersion. This would enable him to oppose the amphibious landing while maintaining his defensive posture. Once the landing was ashore and moving inland, his forces, already dispersed, could lend supporting options from his left (southern) and right (northern) flanks. This would follow Hart's notion that the concept of concentration should only be viewed in relation to the enemy. Once allied forces were dispersed, LtGen Ushijima could use his own dispersal to maneuver and place the weight of his force at the decisive point and time of his choosing.

**CONCEPT: DISSOLUTION**

**THESIS:** Hart espouses that the true aim a strategist must seek in a military decision is the enemy's dislocation. Dislocation results in either the enemy's dissolution, or his easier disruption in battle. (Hart, 325) Dissolution is produced in the physical and psychological spheres, and is accomplished by a move that forces the enemy to change his disposition, separate his force, endanger his supplies, or menace his lines of communication. (Hart, 326)

In the psychological sphere, dislocation is produced by creating an impression in the enemy commander's mind that he should be concerned about acts in the physical sphere. By creating such a psychological concern suddenly, the commander thinks he is unable to counter the enemy's move. In effect, he feels trapped. This usually happens after movements in the physical sphere such as blows from flanking or rear area attacks. As the enemy turns to properly defend the blow, it is temporarily unbalanced, and in turn, at a disadvantage. (Hart, 327)

**ANTITHESIS:** LtGen Ushijima made only a limited effort in seeking the enemy's psychological and physical dislocation. Aerial bombardment and *Kamikaze* attacks on Allied naval forces failed to support his strategy of concentrated and overlapping defenses by not focusing on forces already ashore. These attacks, although taking great toll in shipping and personnel casualties, did little in affecting the American line of retreat, the equilibrium of US dispositions, or Allied supply lines. The reason for this

was twofold: First, he left his defense no room to maneuver. He simply could not disrupt the Allies disposition except in frontal assaults. Against the numerically superior American's, frontal assaults would be suicide. Second, he failed to attack the American commanders' psychological mindset. Absent attacks against their lines of communications or other vital areas, the American commanders were rarely surprised and subsequently never felt trapped.

**SYNTHESIS:** LtGen Ushijima correctly understood how important it was to menace the Allies' naval forces and lines of communication. However, he misjudged the significance and impact on dislocation of the forces ashore through effective moves in time and space. Planned *Kamikaze* attacks against the amphibious assaults would have had devastating effects. The attacks would temporarily disrupt and possibly cut off the assault's lines of communication, as well as inflict heavy personnel casualties. Once Allied forces were ashore and displaced inland, LtGen Ushijima's forces could have attacked the rear through a maneuver on either the US right or left flank. This would have disrupted the enemy's disposition, both afloat and ashore, in the physical sphere, by separating the attacking forces from their naval lifeline. The advance on the US rear area would also, in effect, physically surround the Americans ashore. This, in turn, would affect the commander's psychological sphere, by inducing the sense of being trapped. Since LtGen Ushijima's forces would, in theory, be dispersed, this flank maneuver could also compel the

Allies to make a sudden change of front, thus dislocating the distribution and possibly the organization of Allied forces.

In addition, continuing the large force *Kamikaze* attacks against naval forces afloat, would have the cumulative effect of limiting the Allies' freedom of action. In the physical sphere, this would be produced by forcing the Navy to displace its ships over a wider area to make successful *Kamakaze* attacks more difficult. This distraction would result in such wide dispersion that timely and coordinated naval surface resupply or rescue attempts would be unfeasible.

**CONCEPT: DIMINISHED RESISTANCE FIGHTING.**

**THESIS:** Liddell Hart writes that the purpose of strategy is to diminish the possibility of resistance by exploiting the elements of movement and surprise. (Hart, 323) Movement and surprise are linked in a dynamic interaction. Maneuver by a force that is accelerated or changes direction, carries with it some measure of surprise in the opposing commander's mind. This surprise inevitably affects the commander's ability to counter the movement effectively, in time or magnitude of force. Thus, the greater the psychological advantage strategy created for tactical maneuver, the less likely the enemy will be prone to resist at both the strategic and tactical level.

**ANTITHESIS:** The Thirty-second Army offered the Allies little in the area of movement and surprise. The concentration of Japanese defensive positions left no room for offensive tactical maneuver and very little occurred. This resulted in few surprises for

allied forces, except when defensive emplacements were not encountered on successive ridges or terrain features. After the first week of battle, even the movement of Japanese aerial bombardment and Kamikaze attacks caused little surprise. These attacks were generated from mainland Japan, enabling task force aircraft and warning radar to position for early raid detection.

(Isely, 558)

**SYNTHESIS:** Tokyo staff planners reinforced the Thirty-second Army with more than enough personnel and equipment to defend the island of Okinawa. By the battle's start, 105,000 Japanese military personnel and 24,000 Okinawan conscripts formed to defend the island. (Nichols, 308) General Ushijima's failure to disperse his lines of defense resulted in his army's inability to maneuver on either of the enemy's flanks. This inability to move enabled the Allied forces to fight on a wide front, with deep and overlapping sectors of coverage. Allied unit boundaries were well defined and prohibited any substantial movement by General Ushijima's forces. In effect, Allies forces were rarely concerned with fleeting attacks from the rear or flanks, and concentrated on destroying organized enemy entrenchments. Extraction of Japanese from these entrenchments cost the Allies a heavy toll in personnel casualties, but never challenged the allies' will to fight. The Allies rarely encountered a movement that caused any surprise, a fact which, in turn, smoothed allied movements by not having to countermove. Although Kamikaze attacks constantly threatened supply lines, communication lines, and lines of

retreat, naval activities continued to move over 1,256,000 measurement tons of assault, garrison, ammunition and maintenance cargo ashore. (Nichols, 174)

Had General Ushijima's forces dispersed into the central and northern zones of the island, the amphibious landing would have been opposed. This would have forced the Allies to consolidate on the beachhead, or attack to the left or right of the Japanese main defensive position, enabling movement and attack from the Japanese opposing flank. This movement-counter movement engagement would have given the Thirty-second Army the maneuver and surprise it needed to wage a successful defensive campaign. Eventually, the possibility of Allied resistance would have been greatly diminished, bringing LtGen Ushijima's plan to force the Allies to an anemic standstill much closer to fruition.

#### CONCLUSION

Field Marshall Rommel said, "The British would have been able to prevent the greatest part of their defeats if they had paid attention to the modern theories espoused by Liddell Hart before the war." (Hart, Foreword) The Japanese defenders of Okinawa should have paid attention to these lessons as well. By not adhering to Hart's Theory of the Indirect Approach, LtGen Ushijima failed to formulate his strategy based on the Allied commanders' strategy and disposition of forces. The indirect approach, above all else, would have given the Thirty Second Army a wider sphere for tactical application of its forces. Instead, LtGen Ushijima was never able to resolve the problem of achieving

the enemy's dissolution in both the physical and psychological spheres. This can be attributed to his over-concentration of forces and lack of movement. Additionally, the lack of maneuver prevented the Allied commander from ever being surprised, thus leading to increased resistance fighting and massive casualties.

In the final analysis, by formulating a direct approach for defense of the island, LtGen Ushijima ensured his valiant army a direct defeat.

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