

Conclusions

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Soviet operational and tactical combat in Manchuria evidenced the full maturity of Soviet military theory and practice produced by four years of war. Painstakingly detailed planning and imaginative execution of military operations proved to be the keys to rapid Soviet victory, as these eight case studies testify.

Use of Terrain

Soviet planning for the Manchurian operations required careful analysis of the terrain in the theater of operations, so that Soviet forces could be tailored to take maximum advantage of the terrain. The Soviets acted on the assumption that they could benefit as much by operating over undefended, but tactically hindering, terrain as they could by attacking across defended, but easily passable, terrain, the so-called high speed avenues of approach. Thus, they deployed their forces so they could use all axes of advance into Manchuria, good or bad. The Soviet assumption was correct. The carefully tailored combat units, each with the support necessary to overcome terrain problems, operated successfully on virtually every axis of advance. The 5th Army, with its heavy complement of artillery and armor, overcame strong Japanese fortifications constructed in heavily wooded terrain. The army overcame, isolated, and bypassed fortifications and was able quickly to establish the mobile forward detachments required to drive rapidly into the depths of Japanese defenses. The 1st Red Banner Army tailored its rifle divisions to penetrate twenty kilometers of lightly defended, dense, mountainous forest. The divisions built roads as they advanced, overcame light Japanese resistance, and, in just eighteen hours, emerged into the open Japanese rear area. Despite the nature of the terrain, armor played a crucial role in making this advance possible. North of Lake Khanka, the smaller 35th Army launched two rifle divisions across a relatively broad sector, across a major river, and through miles of marshland. Though armor support of this army faltered, imaginative engineering measures enabled the two rifle divisions to cross the marshes and emerge astride the major Japanese communications route from Mishan to Hutou, deep in the Japanese rear area.

In western Manchuria, the Soviet 39th Army confounded Japanese military planners by thrusting two full rifle corps, led by a tank division and two tank brigades, through the supposedly roadless and impassable Grand Khingan Mountains. While the bulk of the army burst upon the rear of the surprised Japanese force, only one rifle division dealt with the major Japanese fortifications network defending this sector of Manchuria. Along the Sungari River, 15th Army conducted joint operations with the Amur River Naval Flotilla, overcoming more than two hundred kilometers of marshland in a series of amphibious assaults coordinated with the simultaneous advance of a ground force. In all instances, the Soviets formed distinctive armies, some composed of rifle corps and some just of rifle divisions, but all with enough artillery, armor, and engineer support attached. The diversity of the Soviet force was as much a surprise to the Japanese as was its ability to operate over terrain which the Japanese considered impassable.

Surprise

While achieving strategic surprise over the Japanese by use of an elaborate deception plan, the Soviets also achieved operational and tactical surprise. By Soviet definition, one could (and can) achieve surprise by virtue of the location of an attack, by the form of an attack, by one's organization of a force for combat, and by using the cover of darkness and bad weather to mask the attack. The Soviets exploited all of these possibilities. They systematically took advantage of and operated on terrain that the Japanese felt was unsuited for conduct of military operations. Strategically, the Soviets committed the Trans-Baikal Front to a region over which the Japanese believed a front (or even an army) could not operate. Operationally, armies advanced across regions that the Japanese thought only light forces could negotiate. The 39th Army's passage of the Grand Khingans, 1st Red Banner Army's operations in eastern Manchuria, and 35th Army's advance north of Lake Khanka all capitalized on Japanese misconceptions concerning Soviet ability to cross the terrain and to exploit it.

At the tactical level, the examples of surprise were more numerous. Rifle corps and rifle divisions in 5th Army overcame Japanese fortified positions around Suifenho by maneuvering through the dense forests and rugged hills that flanked the fortified positions. The 1st Red Banner Army's divisions penetrated a sector the Japanese had left virtually undefended, as they depended on terrain for security. The 35th Army's divisions likewise managed the swamps north of Lake Khanka, and 15th Army, with naval support, steamed and marched up the Sungari River to Chiamussu. In all of these cases, the Japanese were simply unprepared to deal with such unexpected large-scale attacks, attacks that ripped the initiative from Japanese hands and prevented the Japanese from ever regaining it.

The form of the attack also surprised the Japanese. Expecting frontal Soviet attacks aimed at penetrating and reducing Japanese defenses, the Japanese were unprepared to deal with widespread Soviet use of envelopment and deep exploitations. The tactical envelopment by Soviet 5th Army of Japanese fortifications followed by armor-led deep thrusts toward Mutanchiang, the flanking of the Hutou fortress by 35th Army, and the amphibious envelopments by 15th Army confounded the Japanese. The operational envelopment of Japanese defenses in western Manchuria by the 39th Army preempted and collapsed Japanese defenses in the west.

Flexible Soviet organization for combat broke the stereotyped view the Japanese had of how the Soviets were supposed to fight. Rather than adhering rigidly to a two-echelon operational formation, the Soviets tailored their formations to enemy strength, terrain, and Soviet objectives. While 5th Army formed in two echelons of corps, divisions, and regiments, 1st Red Banner Army organized for combat in a single echelon of rifle corps. The 35th Army attacked in a single echelon of three rifle divisions abreast, as did 15th Army along the Amur River. Both 36th and 39th Armies deployed in a single echelon of rifle corps. Compounding the unsettling effect on the Japanese of varied Soviet echelonment was the fact that the Soviets launched several of their attacks from precombat march column formation (39th Army, for example).

Perhaps the greatest surprise for the Japanese was the Soviet choice of timing for the attack. As early as May 1945, the Soviets had chosen mid-August as the most propitious time for the campaign. (Subsequent events forced the Soviets to attack on 9 August in order to occupy Manchuria before Japan's surrender.) August was the final month of the rainy season when Manchuria usually experienced frequent heavy thunderstorms and heavy flooding. Such weather would make attack conditions difficult, but it would also cover attack preparations and reinforce Japanese complacency. To capitalize further on Japanese surprise from an attack in terrible weather, the Soviets chose to attack at night.

Soviet exploitation of inclement weather and darkness had a devastating effect on the Japanese. Surprise was total, and many Japanese positions fell to the Soviets without a struggle. Initial Japanese defensive lines fell quickly, and the Japanese were never able to recover from the surprise sufficiently to regroup and reestablish defenses. The Soviets have viewed their achievement of surprise and its consequences as one of the most important lessons of the Manchurian campaign.

Maneuver

The Soviets adjusted their operational and tactical techniques to the goal of realizing deep battle and rapid victory. Those techniques were aimed not only at defeating an enemy force, but also at mastering difficult terrain and beating the clock. In many respects the terrain and time requirements

were more imposing problems to overcome than the enemy. All three factors considered together posed a significant challenge for the Soviets. Consequently, while the Soviets used techniques developed during the war in the west, they molded those techniques to the unique theater requirements. Essentially, the Soviets emphasized maneuver at all levels of command, intricate task organization of forces suited to the achievement of precise missions, and time-phased commitment of these forces to battle.

The Soviets maneuvered their forces on a large scale by seeking to envelop Japanese forces at every command level. Tank forces spearheaded almost every enveloping force. At the highest level, the Trans-Baikal and 1st Far Eastern Fronts carried out a strategic envelopment of the entire Kwantung Army. At front, army, corps, and division levels, maneuver was achieved by envelopment. In regions lightly defended by the Japanese, the Soviets initiated envelopment operations by launching forces led by forward detachments deep into the Japanese rear area. The rifle corps of 39th Army used such techniques, as did 36th Army in its advance to Hailar. Where difficult terrain confronted the Soviets (35th Army, 1st Red Banner Army), the Soviets effected the same maneuver at a slower pace. Where Japanese resistance was heavy, such as in 5th Army's sector, assault groups and advanced battalions carried out comparable envelopments of Japanese positions to more limited depths of the defense. Along the Sungari River, amphibious assault units performed the same envelopment function, this time by land and water.

When envelopments succeeded, the Soviets wasted little time in reducing surrounded Japanese forces. Soviet units simply continued their pursuit deep into the Japanese rear areas, usually relying on tank-heavy forward detachments to continue the advance. Throughout Manchuria, Soviet reliance on maneuver produced similar results: the Soviets bypassed, isolated, and later reduced Japanese defensive positions, and the forward momentum of Soviet forces preempted Japanese abilities to construct new defenses. The disjointed and futile efforts of the Kwantung Army high command to stem the Soviet tide reflected the total paralysis of the Japanese command and control system.

Task Organization of Units

In large measure, the Soviet ability to maneuver successfully resulted from the careful task organization of units at every level, so that each could better perform its specific mission. The Soviets created small platoon- or company-size assault groups of infantry, sappers, artillery, and armor to engage specifically identified Japanese strongpoints. These small combined arms entities dealt effectively with Japanese fortified positions during the initial stage of the campaign (5th Army) and during the latter stages, when the Soviets reduced bypassed Japanese fortified regions (Hutou). Soviet advanced battalions were task organized with sapper, armor, and artillery support to enable them to lead the advance of Soviet main force units. Those main forces at division, corps, and army level received support allowing

them to cope with the enemy and terrain in their specific sectors. The divisions of 5th Army differed in composition from divisions operating in 1st Red Banner, 35th, or 15th Armies' sector. Even more important were the division-level attachments of engineer, armor, and self-propelled artillery units.

The best illustration of unit tailoring was the task organization of forward detachments created at every command level in order to initiate the attack or to lead the pursuit. Normally, tank battalions or tank brigades formed the nucleus of forward detachments. The Soviets added to that nucleus motorized infantry, sappers, antiaircraft, antitank, and artillery units, thus creating unique task forces capable of semi-independent operations. At times the terrain and mission dictated the varied size and composition of these detachments. Thus, a tank division became the forward detachment of 39th Army, while 39th Army rifle divisions used their self-propelled battalions as a nucleus for their forward detachments. Some divisions (of 1st Red Banner Army) used rifle battalions reinforced by tanks and sappers as forward detachments. The 205th Tank Brigade of 36th Army and the 257th Tank Brigade of 1st Red Banner Army best illustrate Soviet formation and use of forward detachments. Thus, artful Soviet task organization permitted the Russians to reduce Japanese defenses by a combination of fire and maneuver, rather than by massed infantry assault.*

Throughout the offensive, the Soviets reaped the rewards of successful maneuver by committing these task organized units into combat on a carefully time-phased basis. Soviet 5th Army began its attack with small reconnaissance units, followed by tailored assault groups from the advanced battalions of first echelon rifle divisions. The main force of advanced battalions exploited the gains of the assault groups and were, in turn, followed into battle by main force rifle regiments. The 35th Army led its attack with reconnaissance detachments and border guards units, followed by division advanced battalions and main force regiments. The 1st Red Banner Army crept forward through the forests with small, road-building forward detachments leading the advance of each rifle regiment. Subsequent regimental columns widened the roads and added momentum to the advance. The 39th Army advanced in precombat march formation, with an army forward detachment (tank division) in front, followed in order by rifle corps forward detachments (tank brigades), division forward detachments, and division main force columns.

Such time-phased commitment of forces enabled the Soviets to build up combat power on each axis steadily and to project that power forward into the depths of the Japanese defenses. Rather than overcoming Japanese defenses by wave after wave of advancing troops, the Soviets overcame the defenses by projecting forces forward along hundreds of separate axes, bringing unrelenting pressure to bear on the entire Japanese front, and knifing

*A trend evidenced by Soviet combat in the west since late 1943 and a dominant feature of Soviet combat in 1944 and 1945.

forces into, between, around, and through Japanese forces. In many respects, the Soviet assault resembled infiltration tactics conducted on a massive scale. The resultant intermingling of units and Soviet deep operations on many of the axes caused total confusion among the Japanese defenders.

The operational and tactical techniques evidenced by these eight case studies clearly illustrate the state of Soviet military art in 1945. They reveal an imaginative and flexible Soviet approach to the conduct of combat, a World War II lesson often lost to Western military analysts. The Soviets have ample reason to study their Manchurian campaign, and they do so in immense detail. We should study it as well.

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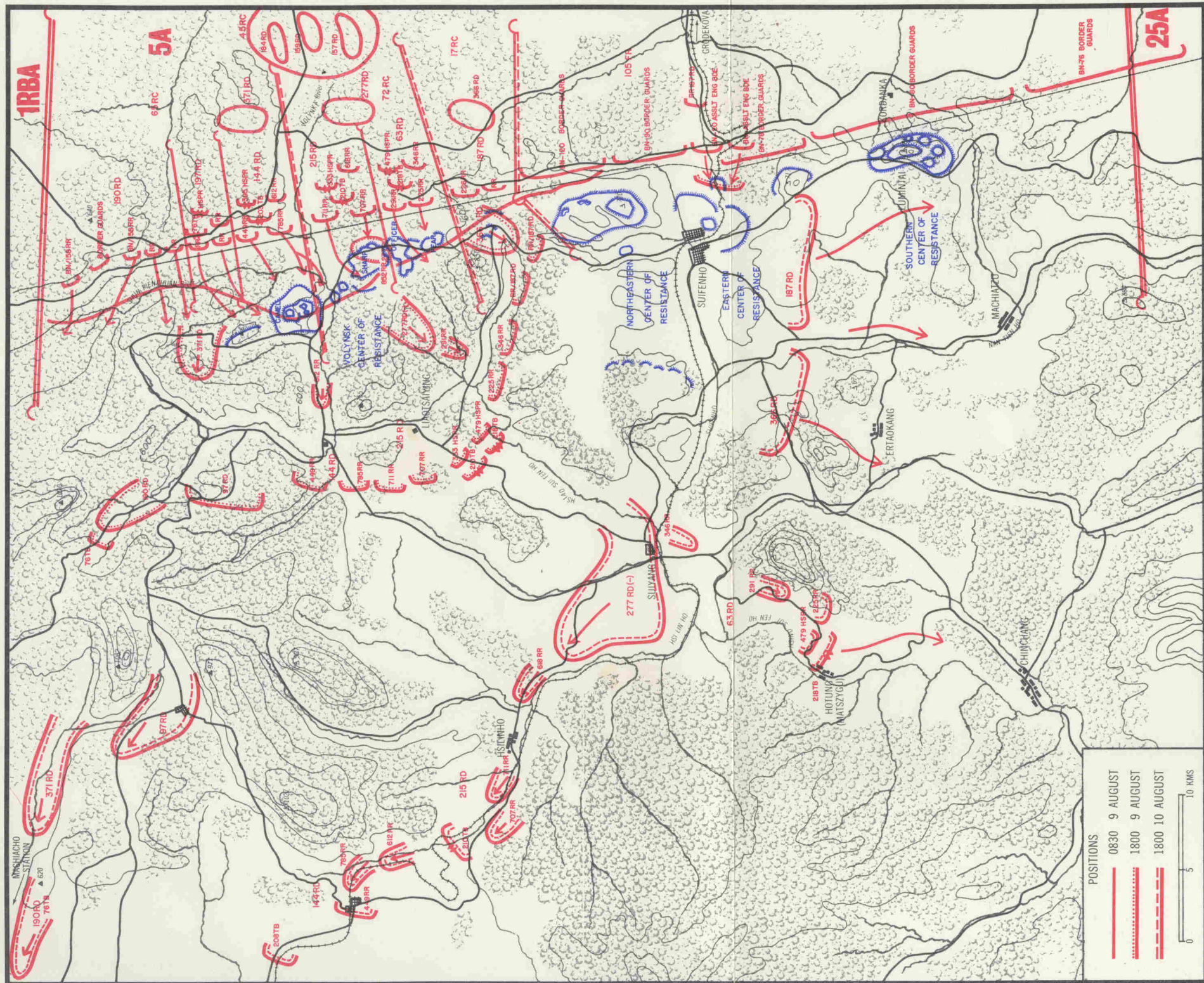
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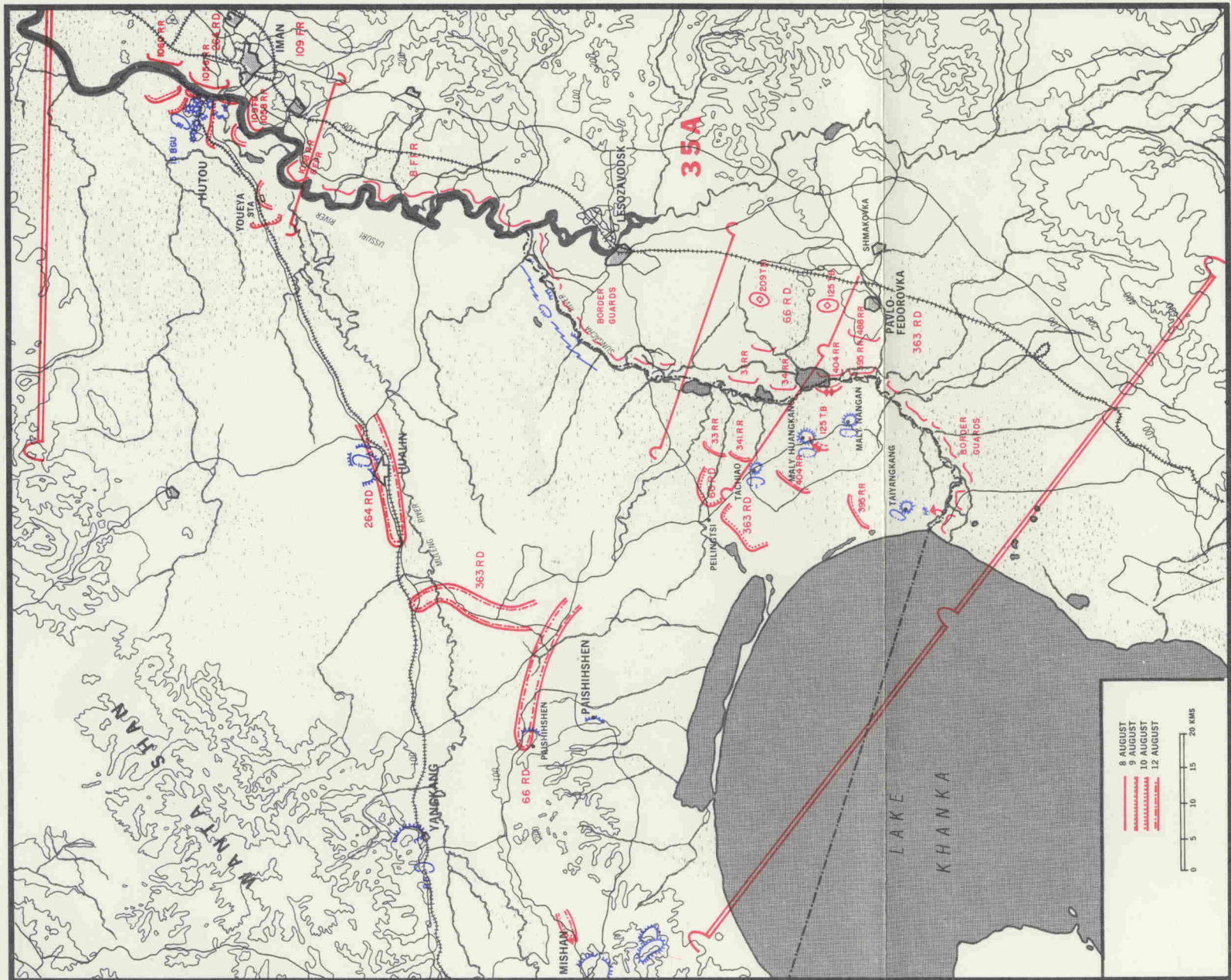
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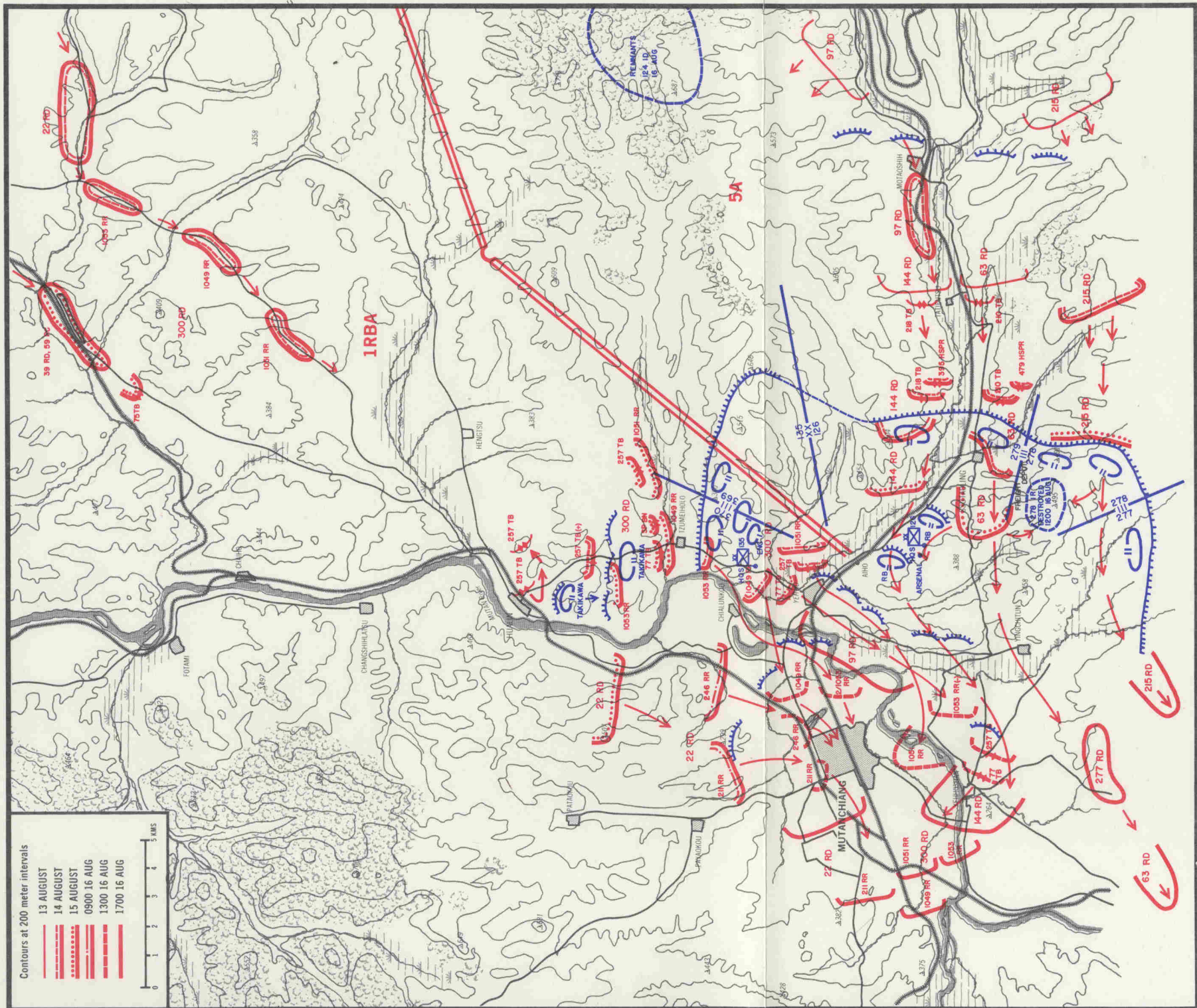
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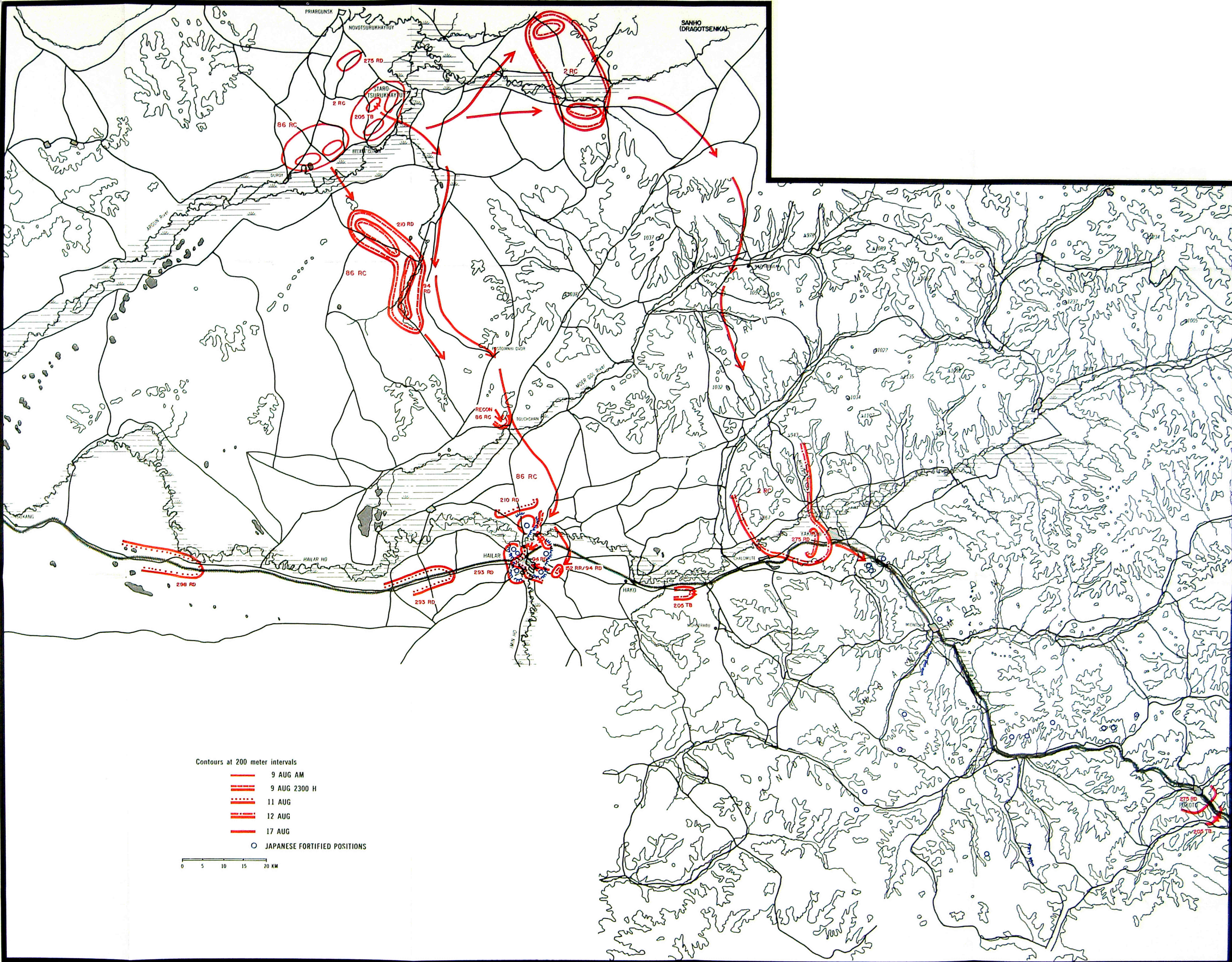
Map 1-3. 5th Army Operations, 9-10 August 1945



Map 3-1. 35th Army Operations, 8-12 August 1945



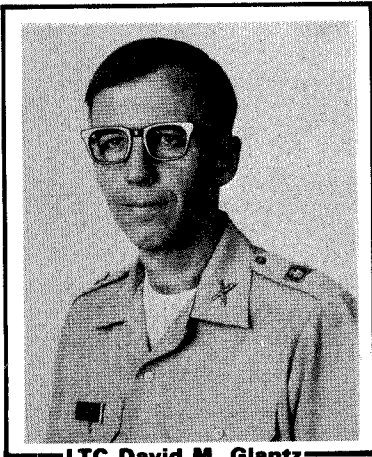
Map 4-7. The Fall of Mutanchiang, 14-16 August



Contours at 200 meter intervals

- 9 AUG AM
- 9 AUG 2300 H
- 11 AUG
- 12 AUG
- 17 AUG
- JAPANESE FORTIFIED POSITIONS

0 5 10 15 20 KM



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The Combat Studies Institute was established on 18 June 1979 as a separate, department-level activity within the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, for the purpose of accomplishing the following missions:

1. Conduct research on historical topics pertinent to the current doctrinal concerns of the Army and publish and distribute the results of such research in a variety of formats to the Active Army and Reserve components.
2. Prepare and present instruction in military history at CGSC and assist other CGSC departments in integrating applicable military history materials into their resident and nonresident instruction.
3. Serve as the TRADOC proponent for the development and coordination of an integrated, progressive program of military history instruction in the TRADOC service school system.



Synopsis of Leavenworth Paper 8

To be successful, a strategic military operation requires careful planning and meticulous execution. History applauds the commander who orchestrates the operation, and major subordinate commanders share in the glory. In reality, however, commanders and soldiers at the operational and tactical levels play an even more critical role in achieving battlefield success. History often accords them little attention.

Practitioners of war must study war at all levels. An understanding of the strategic aspects of military operations is essential in order to provide a context for a more detailed and equally critical understanding of precise operational and tactical techniques. Few officers practice war at the strategic level. The majority wrestle with the myriad of problems associated with implementing those strategic plans.

Leavenworth Paper no. 8, through the medium of detailed case studies, examines the operational and tactical aspects of a major strategic operation—the Soviet offensive in Manchuria in 1945. The case studies, which involve army, corps, division, regimental, and battalion operations, focus on the many problems commanders and soldiers at that level face. Constrained by time, a desperate enemy, rugged terrain, and severe climatic conditions—the realities of war—Soviet commanders devised and implemented techniques that produced victory. This paper highlights those techniques in the knowledge that Soviet theorists have likewise studied them in detail, both historically and in a contemporary context.

