



Written by on April 16, 2010

All for Naught: The Battle of Peleliu

Studs Terkel called World War II the “good war.” If any war could be called good, then the Second World War is at least a candidate. However, it should be remembered that until the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, 70-80 percent or more of Americans in poll after poll said they wanted nothing to do with the war that was raging in the Far East or with the one that had erupted in Europe — and for good reason. By the 1930s it seemed that the death of tens of thousands of American boys during the Great War had been for naught. We were determined not to become entangled in yet another war overseas serving the interests of other nations.



All that changed when we were sucker punched by the Japanese, although many have argued the sneak attack was not a surprise to President Roosevelt. It certainly was to the American people, though, and “Remember Pearl Harbor” became the rallying cry that mobilized the nation and propelled our troops into what became the greatest conflict man has ever seen. We sought no territorial aggrandizement, liberated millions from tyranny, and brought about the downfall of Tojo, Mussolini, and Hitler. The “good war.”

There was much that was not good about WWII, however, especially the well-known abandonment of Eastern Europe to Soviet Communism as the war drew to a close. There were also less well-known blunders in the Pacific, including fighting battles that were entirely unnecessary and cost Americans dearly. The Battle of Peleliu was such a battle. Not only was it unnecessary and horrific but, adding additional insult to those who fought so bravely there, it has generally slipped from our historical consciousness. Few know of the battle or have even heard of Peleliu, a speck of an island in the southwest Pacific. Only six miles long and two miles wide, Peleliu is part of the Palau group of the Caroline Islands, a vast archipelago stretching for 2,000 miles across the Pacific. Peleliu lies 550 miles southeast of the Philippines in splendid isolation. Covered with dense green vegetation and surrounded by turquoise blue water, lapping against white sandy beaches, Peleliu appears to be a tropical paradise.

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The first Europeans to see the Caroline Islands were Portuguese sailors under the command of Diego DeRocha, who chanced upon the island of Yap in 1526. Portugal did nothing about the discovery, and it was Spain that named the archipelago in honor of Spanish King Charles II and made it one of its holdings. The inhabitants of the islands, who could be Polynesian, Melanesian, or Malayan, were left undisturbed. Ships rarely visited the Carolines and for several hundred years few white men set foot on any of the islands.

One of the few to do so was David O’Keefe, as wild a character who has ever lived. Born in Ireland in 1828, he rebelled against British rule and was forced to flee to the United States in 1848, landing in



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Savannah, Georgia. Shipping before the mast, he sailed the high seas, quickly rising through the ranks to command his own merchant ship. His intelligence, good looks, courage, strength, and explosive temper made him a legend among sailors. In 1871, he found himself commanding *Belvedere*, bound for Manila. Caught in a typhoon in the southwest Pacific, the ship foundered in 50-foot waves and broke apart. O'Keefe managed to hang on to a piece of flotsam and miraculously rode out the storm. Days later he washed ashore on Yap. The natives marveled at the sight, thinking he must be favored by the gods. A chief took exception and challenged O'Keefe to a fight. O'Keefe beat him to a pulp.

Hitching a ride on a German ship, O'Keefe made his way to Hong Kong and managed to gain command of another ship. In 1872, he was back in Yap, determined to profit from the copra trade. The Germans had tried to do so, even establishing a small trading station on Yap, but were unable to get any work out of the natives, who lolled about eating coconuts and spearing fish in the lagoon. About the only thing that got the Yapese excited were large stones that they had crafted into discs with drilled holes in the middle. The stones represented power and prestige and were used as a medium of exchange. The quarry for the stone, however, was in the Palau group, 300 miles away. The 600-mile roundtrip voyage in dugout canoes was dangerous and time consuming, and fashioning the rock into discs was difficult with primitive Yapese tools.

O'Keefe was soon making the voyage in his ship and using modern tools to sculpt the rock. The Yapese were much pleased and even began working copra plantations for O'Keefe. He established several trading stations in the Carolines, including the Palau group, and located his home and headquarters at Yap Harbor. As his empire expanded and money from the copra trade rolled in, his fame spread through the islands and beyond. To all he soon became known as "His Majesty, O'Keefe." His reign lasted until 1901 when he and one of his ships disappeared in a typhoon.

Not much changed in the Caroline Islands until the Japanese began their occupation in 1942. The stones that were considered so valuable by the Yapese and others in the islands were now crushed by the Japanese and used to build military roads and airstrips. One of the strips they built with the crushed rock was on Peleliu. It was this two-runway airfield that the American high command thought could threaten MacArthur's proposed landings at Leyte in the Philippines.

Unnecessary Sacrifice of Life

Of all the unnecessary U.S. operations of World War II, Peleliu was not only the most unnecessary but also the costliest in American lives. During May of 1944 our high command decided that Gen. Douglas MacArthur would finally return to the Philippines with a landing on Leyte Island, scheduled for October. To protect his flank it was thought that Peleliu, with its airfield, must be secured. There was less than unanimous agreement on the plan. Admiral William "Bull" Halsey, for one, argued that the operation was unnecessary, that Peleliu should be leap-frogged as had so many other Japanese-held islands in the Pacific. He was overruled.

Prophetically, the mission to take Peleliu was code named "Operation Stalemate." D-day was set for 15 September 1944. The Marine in command of the operation, Maj. Gen. William Rupertus, estimated that it would require only two or three days to secure the island. A 55-year-old career officer and veteran of the Guadalcanal and Cape Gloucester campaigns, Rupertus understood the tenacity and fanaticism of the Japanese. Unbeknownst to Rupertus and to U.S. intelligence, the Japanese had turned Peleliu into one big pillbox. In hundreds of underground caves and tunnels, some with steel doors, they had men, ammunition, and materiel stockpiled for an anticipated American invasion.



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For several days before the invasion, Navy ships shelled Peleliu and Naval and Marine aviators dropped bombs on the island. Much of the island's vegetation was obliterated and the airfield, the principal reason for the operation, was destroyed. No Japanese planes would be taking off from the two runways to threaten MacArthur or anyone else. The Naval admiral in command, Jesse Oldendorf, announced that the Navy had "run out of targets." Piece of cake. The Marines would walk ashore.

At 0832 on 15 September the Marines began to hit the beach, at least those who hadn't already been hit by Japanese artillery and machine gun fire that suddenly roared from hundreds of concealed positions. Several landing craft exploded in balls of flame. Thick smoke hung in the air. The temperature was already in the 90s and rising. It would peak that day at more than 110 degrees. A sailor in command of a landing boat said, "It was the closet thing to Hell I ever want to see." At Orange Beach the approach to the landing site was supposedly deep enough for the boats to glide right up on shore. The water proved more shallow than expected and several boats foundered on coral reefs. For a time it looked as if the landing might be another Tarawa, where Marines were forced to wade through hundreds of yards of water to reach shore.

The noise from machine guns, mortars, artillery batteries, and small arms was deafening. A thousand unmuffled car engines racing at full speed might describe it. Some cursing, some praying, some silent, the Marines, loaded with gear and ammo, came stumbling ashore. These were Marines of the 1st, 5th, and 7th Regiments of the 1st Marine Division. Many were hardened veterans of Guadalcanal and Cape Gloucester, but as many were raw recruits.

Eugene Sledge, one of the youngsters, recalled how the veterans appeared calm, almost disdainful of death. While crawling across the beach with a wall of lead filling the air three or four feet above his head, Sledge recalls how two veteran Marines killed a Japanese and loped up to the body, saying, "Come on Sledgehammer. Time to get some souvenirs." Sledge couldn't believe what he was experiencing. In the middle of deafening explosions, acrid smoke, and a million bits of shrapnel and bullets, the two vets field-stripped the Japanese soldier, stuffed souvenirs into the pockets of their utilities, and then continued firing and loping inland. Sledge, meanwhile, was plowing a furrow across the sand with his prone body and thinking that each new second would be his last.

To make matters worse, not only was the temperature soaring at the time of the landings, but extraordinarily high humidity made it feel like a steam bath. The two canteens that each Marine carried were quickly emptied. Men not felled by bullets or shrapnel dropped from heat stroke. The first water that came ashore from the ships at sea was in oil drums that had not been properly cleaned. Marines gulped it down and then threw it up; some doubled over with stomach cramps.

Taking the High Ground

As difficult as was D-day, it was merely a warm-up to taking the island's high ground, the Umurbrogol Mountains. In earlier battles the Japanese had sacrificed thousands of men in banzai charges against the Marines at the beachhead. The Marines had slaughtered the charging Japanese by the hundreds during such banzai attacks and had not been driven back into the sea. Understanding this, the Japanese commander on Peleliu, Col. Kunio Nakagawa, planned accordingly. He would contest the Marine landing but there would be no banzai charges. From concealed and fortified positions, particularly in the Umurbrogol Mountains, his 11,000 troops of the crack 14th Infantry Division had established interlocking fields of fire that covered nearly every foot of Peleliu. Nakagawa's command post was beneath 50 feet of rock in the center of the mountains.



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Some positions held one Japanese, others two or three. Most positions held dozens of Japanese and a few highly fortified positions hundreds. Some caves were connected by tunnels. Others had their entrances protected by steel doors. There was no principal line of defense to break through. The island would have to be taken position by position. Nakagawa had constructed probably the best defense-in-depth in the Pacific, and his men would fight until the last position was knocked out and the last Japanese killed.

Aided by the rugged terrain, their careful preparation, and new tactics, the Japanese would inflict more than twice as many casualties on the Marines on Peleliu as they had on Tarawa. Proportionally, Marine casualties on Peleliu equaled those suffered on Iwo Jima. Iwo is well known. Peleliu is all but unknown. The 1st Marine Regiment, commanded by Col. Lewis “Chesty” Puller, who was already a legend in the Corps, suffered the brunt of the casualties. The Regiment’s 1st Battalion had an astounding casualty rate of 71 percent, 2nd Battalion 56 percent, and 3rd Battalion 55 percent. Headquarters Company, usually well behind the front lines and presumably in a much safer environment, had a casualty rate of 32 percent. How the regiment remained operational is something to contemplate.

A few days into the battle Puller was described as clad only in filthy, sweat-soaked utility trousers. He had not shaved or washed. “He was absolutely sick over the loss of his men,” said Lt. Col. Lewis Walt, the executive officer of the 5th Marines. “He thought we were getting them killed for nothing.” Nonetheless, Puller, the Marine, fought as ordered. “It seemed impossible that men could have moved forward against the intricate and mutually supporting defenses the Japs had set up,” remarked Brig. Gen. Oliver Smith, second in command of the 1st Marine Division. “It can only be explained as a reflection of the determination and aggressive leadership of Colonel Puller.”

Instead of the three or four days of fighting that had been anticipated, the Marines were fighting for more than a month. Ultimately, the three regiments of Marines — the 1st, the 5th, and the 7th — suffered 6,526 casualties on Peleliu.

A few individual Marine units were simply decimated. Capt. Everett Pope was ordered to take Hill 100. With only 90 men left in his company, Pope fought his way through swampy ground to the base of the hill. Casualties began to mount. He and his men clawed their way up the craggy hill, yard by yard, in the face of murderous fire from dozens of Japanese positions. By late afternoon Pope led those left over the top. They had taken Hill 100 but now discovered that it was a small jutting plateau with a higher hill behind it. Hill 100 was really Hill 200. Japanese mortar, machine gun, and rifle fire rained down on the Marines from above.

As is typical of the tropics, it got dark suddenly — pitch-black dark. Marines a few yards apart couldn’t see one another. By the dozens, out of holes and caves, came the Japanese. Fighting was hand-to-hand, the Marines wielding bayonets, entrenching tools, and K-bars. The Marines killed three, four, or five for every one they lost.

Sunrise revealed a ghastly scene. Bodies were strewn everywhere. Capt. Pope and seven other Marines remained alive. They were out of ammunition but held the hill. They were ordered down.

Hill 100 was emblematic of everything that was Peleliu. The battle for the island was fought with courage and valor that was above and beyond the call of duty. It cost casualties in mind-numbing and heartbreaking numbers. It was all in vain.

Capt. Everett Pope was awarded the Medal of Honor. Altogether eight men received the Medal of Honor for their heroism on Peleliu. Most of the medals were awarded posthumously.



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Small-unit actions similar to Pope's occurred daily from one end of the island to the other — in the Five Sisters, at China Wall, in Death Valley, at the Point, in the Horseshoe, on Bloody Nose Ridge, along Wildcat Trail. Marine rifleman Russell Davis described what it was like:

I picked up the rifle of a dead Marine and I went up the hill. I remember no more than a few yards of scarred hillside, blasted white with shellfire and hot to touch. I didn't worry about death anymore. I had resigned from the human race. I only wanted to be as far forward as any man when my turn came. My fingers were smashed and burned, but I felt no pain. I crawled and scrambled forward and lay still, without any feeling toward any human thing. In the next hole was a rifleman. He peered at me through red and painful eyes. Then we both looked away. I didn't care about him. He didn't care about me. I thought he was a fool and he probably thought I was the same. We had both resigned from the human club. As a fighting outfit, the 1st Marine Regiment was finished. We were no longer even human beings. I fired at anything that moved in front of me. Friend or foe. I had no friends. I just wanted to kill.

The suffering and carnage was nearly unbearable. Eugene Sledge, only 20 years old, simply couldn't comprehend the fanatical attitude of the Japanese. After the first week or two of the battle, the Japanese must have realized, thought Sledge, that they couldn't possibly drive off the Marines and that no Japanese reinforcements would arrive. "From that point onward, they killed solely for the sake of killing, without hope and without higher purpose," said Sledge of the Japanese. "We were fighting in Peleliu's ridges and valleys, in terrain the likes of which most Americans could not even visualize, against an enemy unlike anything most Americans could imagine." Could not imagine? Sledge came upon the bodies of three Marines who had been wounded by the Japanese and dragged off before other Marines could reach them. The Japanese then cut off the hands of the captured Marines and knocked out their teeth. They severed the Marines' penises and stuffed them into the Marines' mouths. As a final insult, they decapitated the Marines and placed the heads on top of the bodies.

During late October the Marines were relieved by soldiers of the Army's 81st Infantry Division. Higgins boats took the Marines to waiting Navy ships. As the Marines struggled up the cargo nets and onto the decks of the ships they were stunned to see Navy officers scrubbed, clean shaven, and starched. One of the ship's officers asked, "Got any souvenirs to trade?" A Marine stood silent for a moment, then reached down and patted his own rear end. "I brought my ass out of there swabie. That's my souvenir of Peleliu."

Meanwhile, the soldiers ashore learned that there was still fighting to be done. The 81st, called the "Wildcat" Division, was a crack outfit, composed mostly of Southern boys with a few Midwesterners thrown in. The division was supposedly only mopping up but suffered hundreds of casualties in the process. Fighting continued until late November. A couple of days earlier, Col. Nakagawa — who was promoted to general during the battle — and Maj. Gen. Kenjiro Murai, who had been sent to the island to aid Nakagawa, had committed suicide.

Nakagawa's last words to his troops — only a little more than a hundred of them were still alive and most of those were wounded — called for them to die for the Emperor in a banzai charge. Many of those who were physically able did so and the soldiers of the 81st Infantry granted them their death wish. At 1100 on 27 November, Col. Arthur Watson reported to Maj. Gen. Paul Mueller, commander of the 81st, that hostilities had ceased. The Operations Report of the 81st Division declared, "The enemy had fulfilled his determination to fight unto death." By then the Army had suffered 110 killed and nearly 800 wounded. Another 2,000 men were suffering from one or another of tropical diseases.



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Some Japanese remained hiding in caves for months after Col. Watson had declared that hostilities had ceased. Army units continued to take casualties from these diehards in the caves and tunnels of the Umurbrogol. Army engineers tried to solve the problem by setting explosive charges in all known caves. On the night of 1 February 1945 a group of Japanese dug their way out of a cave and surrendered. For months afterwards rumors spread that there were still Japanese hiding on the island. The rumors were dismissed as nonsense but nonetheless persisted. Finally, in April 1947, the U.S. Navy brought a retired Japanese admiral to Peleliu. Using a loud speaker and moving from one likely location to another, he broadcast the message that the war had ended. Suddenly, out of a hidden hole in the earth came a Japanese lieutenant and 26 men. They neither fought nor screamed "Banzai," but quietly surrendered.

— Photo: U.S. Navy



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