

With the successful conquest of Saipan, the fleet turned its attention to Guam and Tinian. Guam held special significance both to the marines about to invade and to many sailors in the fleet offshore. Guam was American territory, part of the spoils of the Spanish American War, reconfirmed by the same treaties that gave Japan sovereignty over the other islands of the Marianas. The marines were eager to raise the American flag over the ruins of the Marine Barracks and avenge their brothers who were captured on 10 December 1941, when Japan occupied the island. The people of Guam were American citizens and in the segregated navy of the 1940's, many Guamanians served as mess men aboard the ships of TF-58. They too were eager to see the Japanese ousted from their birthplace and to see their people freed from the captivity, starvation and torture they suffered under occupation.

The 18,000 man Japanese garrison on Guam provided an answer to a question plaguing the Marines since Tulagi – were they drunk or drugged? The Japanese on Guam had amassed vast quantities of liquor and sake and alcohol was liberally prescribed by Japanese officers to fire the courage of the troops. On 21 July 1944, American forces landed on two west coast beaches, north and south of the Orote peninsula aiming to link up and secure the peninsula, its strategic airfield and Apra harbor. The landings were heavily opposed by Japanese artillery and the two separate perimeters were subject to constant infantry counterattack in the first days of the operation. On 25 July, simultaneous alcohol-fueled banzai charges on the northern and southern landing forces failed to oust American forces who, three days later, linked up and took the Orote Peninsula. At the very tip of the peninsula, marines witnessed an unprecedented scene. One tiny, gaunt Japanese soldier surrendered meekly to the troops. Normally, Japanese soldiers fought to the death and when in rare cases captured, they begged for a bayonet to commit Seppuku rather than be shamed. This man appeared almost happy to surrender. When questioned he stated, "Our orders were to fight to the last man." The interrogator responded, "So?" The wisp of a soldier replied, "I am the last man!"

As the battle raged northward, a constant flow of Guamanian people, newly freed from enslavement by the Japanese, moved south to American lines. Most were fed, clothed and given captured Japanese weapons and a significant number returned to the jungle to effect retribution on their former captors. One man, Gaily R. Kamminga, a former member of the Guam Congress, sought out naval officers he'd known before the occupation. He clutched a small pillow, the only comfort allowed him by his captors. Upon meeting his American friends, he ripped it open and handed them its contents – the American flag that flew over the Marine Barracks when it was captured in the first days of the Pacific War. On 10 August 1944, at the cost of some 3,000 Americans and 18,000 Japanese, Guam was once again American Territory – although for many months afterward, Americans were still being killed by Japanese Guerrillas who held no thought of surrender. On 24 Jan 1972, hunters on Guam discovered Japanese Army Sergeant Shoichi Yokoi in a cave where he had hidden and survived for 28 years. Hailed as a hero in Japan, upon meeting the Emperor, he cried bitterly in deep contrition that he failed to do his duty. Such was the enemy American troops would face for the final year of the war.

Tinian was the amphibious operation every marine hoped for since Guadalcanal - "short and sweet." Three days after the Guam invasion, a U.S. fleet showed up off Tinian Town, at the southern end of the island. Here the invasion was expected and here was concentrated Japanese heavy artillery and fixed naval guns. The guns pounded the invasion fleet, actually damaging the battleship Colorado and a destroyer. Presently, the fleet came about and departed the area – Japanese troops rejoiced over their successful defense. They however, were unaware that this "landing" was a ruse and they soon learned the main landing force had ridden their landing craft over from Saipan and hit the island on a small northern beach. The Japanese put up a spirited defense as the marines fought south over the flat plain that would become the North Airfield. Over the next 9 days, nearly all Tinian's 5500 man garrison was destroyed, at a loss of 326 Americans. Tinian saw the first use of a horrible new weapon called

Napalm. Even combat-hardened marines were shocked at the effects of the “Hell Jelly” bombs dropped on Japanese positions. Tinian brought the first glimpses of the conflagration the Japanese would face in the year to come, fueled first by Napalm, later by something much more potent.

The Marianas saw an unprecedented construction boom during the summer and fall of 1944. Guam had over 100 miles of paved roads installed. Buildings to house troops and support personnel, warehouses, shops, mess halls, post exchanges which had to be restocked three times daily, sports facilities and 40 movie theaters. On the flat island of Tinian, new airfields were built, including the massive north field which would house the 1,000 B-29 bombers of the 20th Air Force. Under a hard-nosed, cigar chomping C. O. named Curtis LeMay, the B-29’s would drop fire and destruction on the Japanese home islands. LeMay’s orders were simple: Bomb Japan into submission.

While Curtis LeMay’s bombers rained destruction on Japanese cities, in the U. S., in secret facilities at Hanford, WA and Oak Ridge, TN, scientists and engineers were learning to refine an element called Uranium into highly energetic isotopes called Plutonium and Uranium 235 that theoretically could become super-explosives to be used as weapons of war. On a mountain top in Los Alamos, NM, other scientists and engineers worked to develop this theory into a working system to detonate this new explosive and package it into a weapon light enough to be carried by a B-29 bomber. The end-product of their research was delivered to Tinian in 1945. One year after Tinian’s capture, a B-29 bomber departed from the North Field for Japan with this new weapon in its belly - and changed the world.

With the capture of the Marianas and Biak, Japan had effectively lost World War II. But the killing – the worst carnage of the war – continued for another year. Japan’s outer defense perimeter was broken but Japan fought on. It’s supply lines were severed, it’s machines lacked fuel but Japan fought on. It’s people starved and workers were told to exercise to keep up their strength - but Japan fought on. ..And then the bombing. All Japanese newspapers were highly censored. Should on any censor’s whim, a single word be construed to imply criticism, the writer and editor were sent to the front without any military training. The Kempetai, the Japanese political police, monitored all public and private activities. They were free to enter houses, empty drawers and search anywhere for anything that was evidence of a defeatist thought – they even stood upon Tatami Mats with their boots on, the most vile behavior to any Japanese. Yet diaries did survive the war, and these proved that most Japanese people knew their cause was lost. Older, experienced Japanese officers knew the only path forward was negotiation but they were unable to influence the Emperor who still fervently supported the war. As in ancient Japan, the Emperor yielded to the warrior class and in particular to younger more fanatical officers who shared his view. And so the Pacific War continued.

The rat-infested, steaming island of Pavuvu in the Solomons, was home to the First Marine Division recuperating from the misery of Cape Gloucester. In early September they prepared to return to combat. During a respite from training, they enjoyed the jokes of Bob Hope and Jerry Colonna who were flown over from Banika for a quick show for the marines who would sail soon for parts unknown.

On Babelthuap, in the Palau Islands, General Sadae Inoue commanded the 40,000 troops of the Palau garrison. He believed the Palaus would be required as a base for MacArthur’s return to the Philippines and thus America’s next target. Inoue used most of his troops to defend the port of Babelthuap and assigned Col. Kuneo Nakagawa, one of Japan’s finest infantry officers, to lead an 11,000 man force on the southernmost island which had a small airfield. On 15 September 1944, ships carrying the First Marine Division appeared off this island, by now made nearly impregnable by the brilliant fortifications and new combat tactics developed by Col. Nakagawa. Here would be fought the deadliest, least-known and perhaps least necessary battle of the Pacific War. The island was Peleliu.