

Let me begin my essay on the Battle of Peleliu at the end: Peleliu, acknowledged as the worst battle of the Pacific War, was conquered at the cost of 6,526 First Marine Division casualties (1,252 dead, 5,724 wounded) - half the division's original landing force. The U. S. Army's 81st Infantry Division, who relieved the marines, lost 3,278 casualties (542 dead, 2,736 wounded) mopping up the last Japanese defenders. Japanese dead were approximately 10,900 – almost the entire garrison. 302 prisoners were taken but only 7 were soldiers, 12 were sailors - the rest Korean or Okinawan laborers. The fighting itself is vividly described in the classic combat memoirs of Robert Leckie who suffered the “million dollar wound” on Peleliu and Eugene Sledge who fought there and in Okinawa. Perhaps most telling, is that after its capture, Peleliu was never used as an American Base and largely ignored for the remainder of the war. Thus, any discussion of the Battle of Peleliu must consider whether the battle needed to be fought at all – a question that requires the most careful deliberation since it carries with it the implication that so great a sacrifice of American lives may have been unnecessary.

It has to be acknowledged that assaulting Peleliu was a sound military move to protect the right flank of the coming battle of the Philippine Islands and to deny Japan a major naval base - now even more important since the neutralization of Truk in February, 1944. Although the U.S. Army and Navy disagreed – vehemently – on the military necessity to re-capture the Philippines, nothing was going to dissuade General Douglas MacArthur from fulfilling his vow to return to Philippine soil - MacArthur used all his political acumen to make sure this would happen. Japan's military, although sharing the U. S. Navy's doubts about the strategic value of the Philippines, also knew MacArthur was coming back. Throughout early 1944, Japan embarked on a crash program to fortify the Palaus, because most Japanese strategists surmised that we would first target the Palau Islands as an assembly area for later assaults on the Philippine Islands themselves. The Imperial Japanese Army detached the 14th Infantry Division from China and dispatched it to bolster the defense of the Palau Islands. The 14th Infantry Division was under the command of the able and respected General Sadae Inoue. He and his subordinate commander of the 2nd Infantry Regiment, Col. Kuneo Nakagawa, were regarded as Japan's finest infantry officers. Inoue made only one miscalculation in his defensive plan - he determined the American invasion would take place at the port of Babelthup and committed the bulk of his forces there. This error was more than made up for by his assigning the defense of the smaller island of Peleliu to Col. Nakagawa and his crack 2nd Regiment.

Col. Kuneo Nakagawa flawlessly assembled the components of a classic defense in depth, utilizing for maximum advantage terrain, manpower and prior performance of both friendly and enemy troops. Reviewing Japanese losses since Guadalcanal, he saw clearly the folly of early Japanese tactics. He knew that the Banzai Charge, with its roots in ancient Bushido beliefs about “fighting spirit,” was a useless tactic which severely depleted Japanese troop strength and facilitated previous American victories. No war cry emitted during a Banzai Charge could be as frightening to an enemy as the shock of an exploding artillery shell. (Bob Leckie's account illustrated this with a quote from Napoleon, “God is on the side of heavy artillery.”) Nakagawa abandoned the Banzai Charge in favor of a stand and fight strategy of conserving resources - supplies, ammunition and men. He assigned a single battalion to defend the beaches which were expected to be yielded to invading troops rapidly. His remaining troops and all his artillery were used in a “defense in depth” in fixed, interconnecting, mutually supporting fortifications throughout the rugged hills that dominated the terrain of northern Peleliu.

Peleliu is a 6 by 2 mile island, shaped like a lobster claw. A flat area at the southern end of the island held an airstrip. (Here the invasion would take place.) From the airstrip, the terrain rose in the north to a plateau called by the Japanese the Momiji Plateau, by Micronesians, the Umurbrogal Mountains, and by U.S. Marines, Bloody Nose Ridge. Although no elevation on Peleliu exceeded 300 feet, the

Umurbrogals consisted of steep hillsides, deep defiles and ravines. The ridges held over 500 natural caves, remnants of ancient submerged volcanoes. These caves were improved by the Japanese with fighting positions and barracks and were interconnected by tunnels dug at right angles to the cave entrance, thus protecting the defenders from flame-throwers and grenades. Nakagawa trained his troops on how to cope with the expected naval and aerial bombardment and how to advance during lulls. Abandoning Bushido concepts of death as the soldier's way, Nakagawa declared that "death must have a purpose." Soldiers must preserve their lives until the last possible moment and in death, take with them one or more of the enemy. No longer would Japanese officers arouse their troops to frenzied frontal attacks with suicide charges. Japanese soldiers fought with a plan and remained in their positions, pouring small arms and artillery fire into exposed marines climbing hills or crossing ravines to blast closed each of the 500 caves. (Similar Imperial Japanese Army tactics would increase the ferocity of all remaining land battles in the Pacific War.) Allied doctrine remained unchanged, amphibious operations were honed to a science and infantry tactics still effective. With their new tactics, the Japanese hoped that excessive American casualties would persuade us to seek a negotiated peace – on favorable terms. On 25 July 1944, as fighting continued on Guam and Tinian, Japanese intelligence determined that the next major American operation would be the Philippines. All future Japanese strategy was based on this assessment and the Palaus were put on invasion alert.

Peleliu would be assaulted by the First Marine Division, commanded by General William H. Rupertus, one of the U.S. Marine Corps' most experienced leaders. (He composed the "Rifleman's Creed" memorized by every marine - "This is my rifle, there are many like it but this one is mine.") The First Marine Division was attached to MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Command and thus Gen. Rupertus was privy to all intelligence collected by the Navy and Army. Truckloads of documents had recently fallen into American hands from the Marianas battles and translators gleaned a wealth of actionable intelligence from them. With all this information available to him, Gen. Rupertus determined, based largely on aerial reconnaissance, that Peleliu would be a tough fight but like Tarawa, would fall in less than 4 days. How could Peleliu's formidable defensive preparations have been overlooked? Looking at today's Google Earth image of Peleliu, we find the answer. Thick vegetation disguises the actual terrain of the Umurbrogal Mountains, making them look like gently rolling hills, instead of the steep precipices they actually are. Vegetation still hides the caves and fortifications that remain in the hillsides to this day – exactly as it did in the 1944 aerial reconnaissance photos that General Rupertus relied upon for his assessment. Many factors converged to make the carnage of Peleliu inevitable.

On 7 Sep 1944, air strikes commenced which ousted the Japanese fleet from their Babelthuap Island base. After three days of naval preparatory shelling, the First Marine Division hit the beaches of southwestern Peleliu on 15 September. Immediately, they faced two enemies. Japanese beach defenders opened up with artillery, mortars and machine guns as the landing craft neared the beach. The marines came ashore under withering fire and casualties mounted as beach emplacements were slowly reduced. A second enemy faced by the marines was the extreme Peleliu climate. Daytime highs reached 110-115 degrees and the marines drained their canteens quickly. With no native water found in their action areas, they relied on water supplies shipped in used oil drums. The water tasted and smelled of gasoline and oil, making it unusable. Despite the heat and thirst, the marines advanced across the island and took the airfield under heavy fire from Japanese machine guns and armor on the airfield, and unceasing artillery bombardment from emplacements concealed in the Umurbrogals.

The American position on Peleliu was tenuous and the airfield useless under Japanese shelling until the Umurbrogals were cleared of enemy guns. As American artillery began to denude the hills of vegetation, it became apparent rather soon that General Rupertus' four day assessment would prove a bit optimistic. As the Marines moved into Bloody Nose Ridge, the real Battle of Peleliu commenced.