

Robert Leckie dedicated a tablet at his New Jersey property to his three closest friends in the Marine Corps, Bud “Runner” Conley, Bill “Hoosier” Smith and Lew “Chuckler” Juergens. They had fought together on Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester and now Peleliu. By the time Leckie’s company crossed the Peleliu airfield in the first days of the invasion, Leckie, Runner Conley and Hoosier Smith were out of action with severe wounds. Juergens would be wounded later on, during the fight for the Umurbrogals.

As the marines moved against Bloody Nose Ridge, which by then had been denuded of camouflaging vegetation by constant naval shelling, Col. Nakagawa’s defensive preparation had become evident - and worse than anyone imagined. Every one of the steep hillsides was pocked with natural caves, improved with prepared fighting positions. Every possible approach to enemy positions was registered for Japanese artillery and covered by interconnecting fields of machine-gun fire. There was no soft ground to dig foxholes only rock-hard coral hillsides. The marines poured on covering fire as they crept up on enemy positions and either hit them with flame-throwers or satchel-charges to drive the defenders back into their tunnels. Then wherever possible, the entrance was sealed shut with high explosives and the assault continued to the next cave, mere yards away. Casualties mounted. The tropical heat added to the misery of the battlefield by day and the nighttime brought little rest. Despite constant illumination shells fired over the nighttime battlefield, Japanese soldiers infiltrated American lines and killed marines in their fighting holes – frequently mutilating their corpses by placing dead marines’ severed penises in their mouths. As Eugene Sledge and his fellow marines saw these corpses, their hatred for the enemy burned. Sledge and many others would retain their hatred for the Japanese long after the war. (In Japan, the tightly-controlled media circulated pictures of mutilated Japanese soldiers, in particular a famous American news photo of an American tank “decorated” with Japanese skulls. This propaganda stoked extreme hatred of Americans on the Japanese side as well.)

As Japanese shelling abated, Seabees improved the airfield and Marine Corps aviators began providing close air support - close being the operative word. With targets a short distance from the runways, the Corsair pilots didn’t bother retracting their landing gear. They took off, made their strafing or bombing runs and returned to rearm in a few minutes. There was no gallantry on Peleliu, no rules of war, nothing remained to connect the combatants with their humanity. Japanese soldiers harbored no thoughts of surrender. They continued fighting to the death and when wounded, exploded grenades when approached by marines clearing the position. The marines methodically moved from position to position, killing the Japanese defenders with little more interest than sweeping a floor. The marine’s only thought was of killing the last Japanese soldier on Peleliu and getting off the island with his life. Consequently, the number of “Battle Fatigue” cases began to soar.

The marines shot, blasted and burned their way to the northern end of the island, then crossed over to clear Ngesebus Island, just north of Peleliu. Here 20-year-old Eugene Sledge, son of a Mobile Alabama physician, sat down to rest next to a supposedly “cleared” Japanese bunker. Sledge heard Japanese voices inside and warned his squad who commenced attacking the bunker. While waiting for a flame-thrower, Sledge saw a Japanese soldier emerge and arm a grenade. Sledge whipped up his carbine and fired. Eugene Sledge was an avid hunter, with shooting skills honed by the Marine Corps – the outcome was not in doubt. He saw his bullets hit the Japanese and saw him wince in pain, still endeavoring to throw the grenade. The shots alerted his buddies and in seconds a fusillade of rifle fire finished the Japanese soldier, his own grenade providing the coup-de-gras. Sledge would kill many more Japanese with his specialty weapon, the 60mm mortar but this face-to-face combat, especially the enemy’s expression of pain, would haunt Sledge for the rest of his life. When Eugene Sledge returned from the war he remained supportive of hunting and shooting sports but he himself could never shoot an animal again. He would suffer nearly crippling PTSD symptoms – and a hatred for the Japanese - until his death in 2001. After 30 days of the most intense fighting of the Pacific War, the First Marine

Division was relieved on Peleliu by the Army's 81st Infantry Division who completed the conquest of the Palau Islands. Eugene Sledge and the battered remnants of his First Marine Division returned to Pavuvu to recover. Sledge was yet to face the most intense, protracted fighting of the Pacific War on Okinawa, however in Eugene Sledge's opinion and that of most First Marine Division veterans of Peleliu and Okinawa, Peleliu would be regarded as the worst land battle of the Pacific War. This opinion is based on the number of casualties suffered in just 30 days of combat on Peleliu.

In mid-October 1944, as the Army was landing at Leyte in the Philippines and the first of the B-29 bombers were landing on Saipan, Col Kuneo Nakagawa burned his regiment's colors and committed suicide. Peleliu had fallen - but by then, the war had passed Peleliu by and the Philippines got the headlines. On 23 September 1944 as the Peleliu battle raged, Ulithi, closer to the Philippines and with a capacity for 700 ships, was abandoned by its small Japanese garrison and taken unopposed. Ulithi soon became the Navy's largest west-Pacific anchorage and staging area for the Leyte landings. Army troops landing at Leyte sailed from Northern New Guinea – Peleliu was no longer necessary.

Even before the invasion, Peleliu and the Palau port to the north, had been made unusable to the Japanese by U. S. Naval and Army aviation in exactly the same way they neutralized the major ports of Rabaul and Truk. Why then, did MacArthur ignore the unanimous advice of the U. S. Navy to bypass Peleliu? (As it became known after the war, even the Japanese Navy put no value on the Palaus.) My own analysis is that both MacArthur and Gen. Rupertus, whose First Marine Division was “on loan” to the Army for Peleliu, both relied on flawed intelligence that pointed to an intense but short battle. I do not believe that MacArthur's ego or inter-service rivalry played any role in the choice to invade rather than bypass. MacArthur was too good a strategist put ego before sound military practice. Peleliu, even cut off from Japanese resupply, still represented a threat to the right flank of the Philippine invasion – now MacArthur's primary focus. He ordered the Peleliu operation with the attitude of “Heck, we can get Peleliu for free so let's put it on the shelf and see if we need it later.” Japan's fierce and effective defense came as a surprise to all - and that's probably why the slaughter on Peleliu was not widely known to the American public. MacArthur's famous picture coming ashore at Leyte now burnished his, and the Army's image. Nobody wanted their careers tarnished by the possibility that the slaughter on Peleliu might have been unnecessary.

Let no one say however, that the marines who died or were maimed on Peleliu suffered in vain. An island that Japan had no right to was liberated and a crack division that might have come up against American forces at a later date was destroyed. New tactics employed by Japan were encountered and analyzed for later operations. Douglas MacArthur returned to the Philippines with his right flank securely in American hands and a good airfield available should they need it. The Pacific War was far from over. Japan's Army was still strong and numerous and its Navy possessed considerable fighting strength. Douglas MacArthur would lead the Army to Tokyo – through his beloved Philippines. To support him, the fighting strength of the U. S. Navy was, for the remainder of 1944 and early 1945, dedicated to supporting the Army in the Philippines and the Air Corps' bombing of Japan. This would lead to the greatest naval battle in history, the Battle of Leyte and to a photograph, taken on a dormant volcano in February, 1945 that would re-energize an American public by then, tired of war.

After many months in the hospital, Robert Leckie returned to New Jersey and resumed his writing career, publishing his combat memoir, “Helmet For My Pillow” in 1957. Many of his 40 other books are monuments to the Marine Corps and the Pacific War. Peleliu today, is remote and unknown to most of the world. A rusting Japanese gun pokes from an overgrown, crumbling concrete bunker. American monuments and a Shinto Shrine mark Bloody Nose Ridge. Only the wind and the birds are heard on Peleliu now, but a dedicated few still hear Peleliu's voices, hardly silenced by the passage of 75 years.