

For veterans of Guadalcanal - like Robert Leckie - the landing on Peleliu (the 39th Allied attack of the Pacific war) was a far-different experience from the landing at Guadalcanal (the first island attack). This time, the Marines faced horrendous attacks even before they reached the beach.

For a first-timer, like eighteen-year-old Eugene Sledge (who was part of the second wave ashore), it was shocking to be involved in such a dangerous undertaking:

We moved ahead, watching the frightful spectacle. Huge geysers of water rose around the amtracs ahead of us as they approached the reef. The beach was now marked along its length by a continuous sheet of flame backed by a thick wall of smoke. It seemed as though a huge volcano had erupted from the sea, and rather than heading for an island, we were being drawn into the vortex of a flaming abyss. For many it was to be oblivion.

*Our amtrac spun around and headed back out as I reached the edge of the beach and flattened on the deck. The world was a nightmare of flashes, violent explosions, and snapping bullets. Most of what I saw blurred. My mind was benumbed by the shock of it. (Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, pages 56; 59.)*

Leckie describes what happened when he came ashore:

Behind me a shell landed, blowing a man clear out of his high-laced jungle boots. . . He lived, but the war was over for him.

...

We were pinned down, but not by mortars alone. Machine gun fire came from an invincible outpost which the Japanese had blazed out of a coral promontory jutting into the bay. We had found an opening in it, and even then were filling it with all manner of small arms fire: grenades, sticks of dynamite hurled by men who had crept up to it, or billowing fire from the flame throwers who also had gained the hole - but the answering fire continued to rake our deadly picnic ground.

*Examining our position, now, I saw that the beach lay before a line of scrub. Beyond this were the coveted airfield and the main enemy fortifications, which we were to call Bloody Nose Ridge. (Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow*, page 283.)*

Sledge watched, helplessly, as young men who would never again stand began to fall:

Japanese machine-gin bursts made long splashes on the water as though flaying it with some giant whip . . . I caught a fleeting glimpse of a group of Marines leaving a smoking amtrac on the reef. Some fell as bullets and fragments splashed among them. Their buddies tried to help them as they struggled in the knee-deep water.

...

I turned my face away and wished that I were imagining it all. I had tasted the bitterest essence of war, the sight of helpless comrades being slaughtered, and it filled me with with disgust. (Sledge, pages 59-60.)

As the Marines continued their assault, they saw another strange sight they had not witnessed before:

Then began an odd procession. The hole suddenly was filled with the figure of a Japanese soldier. He jumped out of sight. Then another. Another. Each appearance set off a mad crackle of small arms fire. We might have been shooting at rabbits, for they appeared with the quick furtiveness of rodents, disappearing just as swiftly, as though their fortress were a warren - which is what it was, for the Japanese had possessed Peleliu for two decades and had blasted into the coral a network of mutually supporting caves. When a Jap jumped, he was making his exit to another position - perhaps even scurrying away beneath us. (Leckie, page 283.)

Like many ocean islands, Peleliu has no water of its own. Gathering rainwater into cisterns is how people who lived on Peleliu got by. But the men who invaded this coral rock in the Pacific were not thus supplied. Leckie describes what it was like to be hot (it was the 15th of September, 1944) and thirsty while assaulting a seemingly impregnable foe:

It was hot. The white sand burned through our clothing. It was the enervating heat of the steam room. The sweat slid into one's mouth to aggravate thirst. The water in our canteens was hot, and when I had drunk it all, I filled it with dirty rain water lying in shell craters. Peleliu has no water. The Japanese caught theirs in cisterns open to the sky, and ours had been floated in to us in gasoline drums, from which some fool supply officer had neglected to cleanse the residuary oil. Smelling and tasting of gasoline, it was undrinkable. A brazen sun beat upon us when, freed by the silence of the fortress, we rose and marched through the scrub to the airfield. (Leckie, page 284.)

The "silence of the fortress" would not last long:

We were advancing again. Our objective was Bloody Nose Ridge. This was the high ground visible from across the airfield. It gave the enemy perfect observation. Advancing across the flat table of crushed coral on which there was hardly a single depression, we were as easily sighted as clay ducks in a shooting gallery. But there was no other route and we had to take it.

Grass-cutting machine gun fire swept the airfield. Mortar shells fell with the calm regularity of automation. It was as though they had determined at what rate they could kill the most of us and were satisfied with it, unhurried in its application. Marines fell. They crumpled, they staggered, they pitched forward, they sank to their knees, they fell backward. They kept advancing. (Leckie, page 287.)

Something was strange during this battle - something which the Marines had not previously encountered. It seemed as though the Japanese were buried inside the island itself.

See, also:

Battle of Peleliu - Japanese Defenses

Battle of Peleliu - Cave Warfare

Eugene ("Sledgehammer") Sledge Describes the Battle of Peleliu

Video: 5-Part Biography of Eugene ("Sledgehammer") Sledge

Video: Robert Leckie Historical Footage

Video: Biography of John Basilone

Historic-Footage Scenes from the Battle of Peleliu

Credits:

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