

In this historic footage, from the U.S. National Archives, we see the impact of Japan's dug-in fortifications and protected weapons. As Marines continue to move ahead, toward Peleliu's airfield, they are mowed-down by fire from hidden Japanese weapons in the protected high-ground area of Bloody Nose Ridge.

Eugene Sledge, fighting in his first battle, tells us what it was like to be there on the 15th of September, 1944:

Bloody Nose Ridge dominated the entire airfield. The Japanese had concentrated their heavy weapons on high ground . . . We moved rapidly in the open, amid craters and coral rubble, through ever increasing enemy fire. I saw men to my right and left running bent as low as possible . . . We were exposed, running on our own power through a veritable shower of deadly metal and the constant crash of explosions.

For me the attack resembled World War I movies I had seen of suicidal Allied infantry attacks through shell fire on the Western Front. I clenched my teeth, squeezed my carbine stock, and recited over and over to myself, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me. . ."

The sun bore down unmercifully, and the heat was exhausting. Smoke and dust from the barrage limited my vision. . . Chunks of blasted coral stung my face and hands while steel fragments spattered down on the hard rock like hail on a city street. Everywhere shells flashed like giant firecrackers.

*Through the haze I saw Marines stumble and pitch forward as they got hit. I then looked neither right nor left but just straight to my front. The farther we went, the worse it got. The noise and concussion pressed in on my ears like a vise. (E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, page 79.)*

Why were the Marines inflicted with such horrific casualties? Because they were fighting against men who were firmly ensconced within protected caves - about five hundred such places. Even top commanders began to wonder why the Japanese seemed indestructible.

Then ... the Marines realized the power of the enemy at Peleliu was tied to their interconnected caves. The Allies had three ways to overcome this deadly strategy, as noted by the narrator of this historic footage. They would have to "blow them out, burn them out or seal them in."

The slaughter, on both sides, continued. Decades later, reflecting on what he and others had been through, Sledge wrote these words about Peleliu in his book, *With the Old Breed*:

To the noncombatants and those on the periphery of action, the war meant only boredom or occasional excitement; but to those who entered the meat grinder itself, the war was a nether world of horror from which escape seemed less and less likely as casualties mounted and the fighting dragged on and on. Time had no meaning; life had no meaning. The fierce struggle for survival in the abyss of Peleliu eroded the veneer of civilization and made savages of us all. We existed in an environment totally incomprehensible to men behind the lines - service troops and civilians. (With the Old Breed, page 121.)

When the flamethrowers moved into position (see photo on page 117), they were facing an enemy largely without food and water. Still, the Japanese defenders did not give up:

Stooped under the heavy tanks on his back, Womack [a Marine corporal who served as a flamethrower] approached the pillbox with his assistant just out of the line of our fire. When they got about fifteen yards from the target, we ceased firing. The assistant reached up and turned a valve on the flamethrower. Womack then aimed the nozzle at the opening made by the 75mm gun. He pressed the trigger. With a whoooooooooosh the flame leaped at the opening. Some muffled screams, then all quiet.

Even the stoic Japanese couldn't suppress the agony of death by fire and suffocation. But they were no more likely to surrender to us than we would have been to them had we ever been confronted with the possibility of surrender. In fighting the Japanese, surrender was not one of our options. (With the Old Breed, page 118.)

Enduring the fight for Bloody Nose Ridge, not to mention Peleliu itself, took a huge toll on even the most battle-hardened Marines. It wasn't just a day-to-day fight for survival. Sledge describes what it was like hour-by-hour:

We were resigned to the dismal conclusion that our battalion wasn't going to leave the island until all the Japanese were killed, or we had all been hit. We merely existed from hour to hour, from day to day. Numbed by fear and fatigue, our minds thought only of personal survival. The only glimmer of hope was a million-dollar wound or for the battle to end soon. As it dragged on and on and casualties mounted, a sense of despair pervaded us. It seemed that the only escape was to be killed or wounded. The will for self-preservation weakened. (Sledge, page 128.)

The heat, and difficult terrain, were not the only issues adding to a man's general despair. There was the constant, awful stench which soon permeated Peleliu:

The sun bore down on us like a giant heat lamp. Once I saw a misplaced phosphorous grenade explode on the coral from the sun's intense heat. . . Everywhere we went on the ridges the hot humid air reeked with the stench of death. A strong wind was no relief; it simply brought the horrid odor from an adjacent area. Japanese corpses lay where they fell among the rocks and on the slopes. It was impossible to cover them. Usually there was no soil that could be spaded over them, just the hard, jagged coral...

It is difficult to convey to anyone who has not experienced it the ghastly horror of having your sense of smell saturated constantly with the putrid odor of rotting human flesh day after day, night after night. This was something the men of an infantry battalion got a horrifying dose of during a long, protracted battle such as Peleliu. In the tropics the dead became bloated and gave off a terrific stench within a few hours after death. (Sledge, page 142.)

Before the battle for Peleliu was finally over, both sides sustained unbelievably high casualties.

See, also:

Battle of Peleliu - Japanese Defenses

Battle of Peleliu - Marines Land on the Beaches

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:

Clip of historic battle footage from the U.S. National Archives and Department of Defense, compiled as "Battleline - Peleliu." Online, courtesy Archive.org.

Quoted passages from [Helmet for My Pillow](#), by Robert Leckie, and [With the Old Breed](#), by E.B. Sledge.

American Casualties (Dead and Wounded):

The Marines sustained [6,526 casualties](#). Of those, 1,252 were listed as dead (killed in action, died of wounds and missing/presumed dead). The rest were injured.

The 81st Infantry Division, Reinforced, lost 1,393 officers and men on Peleliu (208 were killed in action), with 1,676 additional casualties (196 killed in action) on Angaur.

Japanese Casualties (Dead and Captured):

Of approximately 11,000 men at the start of the battle, it is believed 10,695 Japanese defenders died and 202 were captured.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Battle-of-Peleliu-Cave-Warfare2>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Battle-of-Peleliu-Cave-Warfare2>