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As the Allies developed plans to defeat Japan in the Pacific, recapturing the Philippines became a major priority. With an expected landing at Leyte, MacArthur wanted nothing to stand in victory's way.

Peleliu - east of the Philippine island of Mindanao (located immediately south of Leyte) - had an airfield and was occupied by a dug-in force of 10,000 (or so) Japanese troops. U.S. military planners were worried that enemy planes would use Peleliu's airstrip to interfere with MacArthur's Philippine-invasion forces.

In a move debated then (and now), MacArthur ordered the taking of Peleliu (one of the Palau Islands located more than 600 miles away from Leyte). The General (and other senior military planners) wanted to protect MacArthur's right flank in the Philippine Campaign, but even in September of 1944, not everyone agreed that the battle of Peleliu was necessary.

No one asked the men sent to fight at Peleliu (initially the 1st Marine Division, relieved by the Army's 81st Infantry Division) what they thought of the need for combat on the coral island. Military commanders make such decisions. But we can get a glimpse of what they went through, thanks to historical footage of the battle and personal memoirs later written by men who were there.

Two books movingly describe what happened at Peleliu: *Helmet for My Pillow* (by Robert Leckie) and *With the Old Breed* (by E.B. Sledge). Their battle descriptions, coupled with the video footage, transport us back in time as we watch one of the deadliest fights of the Pacific war.

After the 1st Marines' successful work at Cape Gloucester, they rested at Pavuvu (an island with lots of rats). Arriving at Pavuvu around the time his childhood friend - Sid Phillips - was leaving, Sledge (a new recruit) had no battle experience.

Phillips did not tell his friend (known to other Marines as "Sledgehammer") that he was about to enter "a very fearful time" of life. It was just as well, since the Americans were confident of another victory.

In fact, they had no idea what they would soon face. The Allies lacked intelligence on an important fact: The Japanese had changed their way of island fighting.

Replacing suicidal bonzai charges with dug-in fortifications, including underground caves and old mine shafts connected by tunnels - not to mention well-positioned, hidden pill-boxes - Japanese forces at Peleliu were still prepared to die. This time, however, they would fight a battle of attrition. If they lost Peleliu, they wanted as many Allies as possible to die with them:

On Peleliu the Japanese commander, Col. Kunio Nakagawa, let the Marines come to him and the approximately 10,000 troops of his proud 14th Infantry Division. From mutually supporting positions, the Japanese covered nearly every yard of Peleliu from the beach inland to the center of Nakagawa's command post, deep beneath the coral rock in the center of the ridge system.

*Some positions were large enough to hold only one man. Some caves held hundreds. Thus the Marines encountered no one main defense line. The Japanese had constructed the perfect defense-in-depth with the whole island as a front line. (Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, page 53.)*

Approaching the island, none of the Marines knew the entire place was "a front line." Bob Leckie, however, could see really bad things were in store for them:

Peleliu was already a holocaust.

The island - flat and almost featureless - was an altar being prepared for the immolation of seventeen thousand men.

As the Marines approached Peleliu's beach:

*The enemy was saluting us. They were receiving us with mortar and artillery fire. Ten thousand Japanese awaited us on the island of Peleliu, ten thousand men as brave and determined and skillful as ever a garrison was since the art of warfare began. Skillful, yes; it was a terrible rain and it did terrible work among us before we reached the beach. (Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow*, pages 278-79.)*

Although Leckie and his buddies were among the first assault wave, the beach was already filled with the carnage of battle:

Our amtrack was among the first assault waves, yet the beach was already a litter of burning, blackened amphibian tractors, of dead and wounded, a mortal garden of exploding mortar shells. Holes had been scooped in the white sand or had been blasted out by the shells, the beach was pocked with holes - all filled with green-clad helmeted marines.

We were pinned down. (Leckie, page 279.)

Life on Peleliu, for both sides, was about to get even deadlier. And ... the situation was made even worse by cave warfare on the island.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/BATTLE-of-PELELIU-LANDINGS-Wind-Talkers-Navajo-C-ode-Talkers-in-WWII>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/BATTLE-of-PELELIU-LANDINGS-Wind-Talkers-Navajo-Co-de-Talkers-in-WWII>

Media Stream



Battle of Peleliu - Japanese Defenses

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

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Battle-of-Peleliu-Japanese-Defenses1>



Battle of Peleliu - Marines Land on the Beaches

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.

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Battle of Peleliu - Cave Warfare

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.

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