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This combat photo, taken during the Battle of Peleliu, depicts a U.S. Marine who weeps after killing a Japanese opponent. Online via the U.S. Naval Institute.

Japan's dug-in [island defenses](#) were new and deadly effective. Eugene Sledge could not believe that Marines, trained to endure the most appalling circumstances, sometimes felt helpless as the battle for Peleliu continued:

I learned a new sensation: utter and absolute helplessness ... Time had no meaning to me. (Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, page 63.)

Marines who survived the beach landings were both hungry and thirsty as they tried to sleep before the next day's onslaught. Japanese soldiers, however, infiltrated the lines at night, making rest another wished-for event:

We met the heat of morning with dried mouths, and lips that were beginning to crack, and stomachs grumbling with unrequited hunger. The heat began to rise again refracted off the coral surface of Peleliu, baking the atmosphere, encompassing us in an oven. (Leckie, *Helmet for my Pillow*, page 289.)

As the Marines pushed across the open airfield, amidst fierce and unrelenting Japanese fire power, the sounds of shelling deafened the invaders' ears:

Word filtered along to us that quite a number of casualties had been caused by the terrible point-blank fire of the enemy cannon.
... to be shelled was terrifying, and to be shelled in the open on your feet was horrible; but to be shelled point-blank was so shocking that it almost drove the most resilient and toughest among us to panic. Words can't convey the awesome sensation of actually feeling the muzzle blasts that accompanied the shrieks and concussions of those artillery shells fired from a gun so close by. We felt profound pity for our fellow Marines who had caught its full destructive force. (With the Old Breed, pages 124-5.)

Robert Leckie (who survived the war and later married [Vera Keller](#)) was one of those Marines who caught "its full destructive force." He describes his injuries as war-ending:

The war ended for me. I had been shattered. No good, a dry husk. Modern war had had me. A giant lemon squeezer had crushed me dry. (Helmet for My Pillow, page 296.)

As the days dragged on, and the island's smell worsened (due to so much heat impacting so many dead bodies), Captain Andrew Haldane (beloved commander of K/3/5) and his Marines took over at Hill 140. It was the 12th of October, 1944, and the area was filled with Japanese snipers.

The only way for K/3/5 to assess their new situation was for some of the men to fleetingly look over the hilltop. Not one to send his men to do something he would not do himself, Haldane (affectionately known as "Ack Ack") was among those who crawled to the top of the ridge.

Momentarily raising his head, four or five inches above the rocks, K/3/5's skipper was instantly killed by a single shot through the forehead. His men, including Snafu Shelton and Sledge (who later dedicated *With the Old Breed* to Haldane), were stunned:

Never in my wildest imagination had I contemplated Captain Haldane's death. We had a steady stream of killed and wounded leaving us, but somehow I assumed Ack Ack was immortal. Our company commander represented stability and direction in a world of violence, death, and destruction. Now his life had been snuffed out. We felt forlorn and lost. It was the worst grief I endured during the entire war. The intervening years have not lessened it any. (With the Old Breed, page 140.)

When the battle for Peleliu was finally over, Allied casualties were extremely high. Sledge describes the tally in his book, *With the Old Breed*:

The cost in casualties for a tiny island was terrible. The fine 1st Marine Division was shattered. It suffered a total loss of 6,526 men (1,252 dead and 5,274 wounded). The casualties in the division's infantry regiments were: 1st Marines, 1,749; 5th Marines, 1,378; 7th Marines, 1,497. These were severe losses considering that each infantry regiment started with about 3,000 men. The army's 81st Infantry Division [who relieved the Marines at Peleliu] would lose another 3,278 men (542 dead and 2,736 wounded) before it secured the island.

...Company K, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines went into Peleliu with approximately 235 men, the normal size of a World War II Marine rifle company. It left with only 85 unhurt. It suffered 64 percent casualties. Of its original seven officers, two remained for the return to Pavuvu.

For its actions on Peleliu and Ngesebus [a neighboring island], the 1st Marine Division received the Presidential Unit Citation. (With the Old Breed, pages 155-6.)

And what of the Japanese defenders? Their losses were utterly staggering:

Most of the enemy garrison on Peleliu died. Only a few were captured. Estimates as to the exact losses by the Japanese vary somewhat, but conservatively, 10,900 Japanese soldiers died and 302 became prisoners. Of the prisoners only 7 were soldiers and 12 sailors. The remainder were laborers of other oriental extractions. (Sledge, page 155.)

Eugene Sledge - who later married Jeanne Arceneaux (with whom he had two sons) - was one of the men from K/3/5 who survived the war. He earned a PhD and became a much-loved professor of biology at the University of Montevallo.

Historians and military scholars still debate whether the Battle of Peleliu was worth all the deaths. One thing, however, was clear. The Navajo Code Talkers had once again helped their side prevail:

The Third Amphibious Corps reported ... that it had made extensive use of the famous Navajo Talkers in their radio communications.

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

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/CASUALTIES-at-PELELIU-Wind-Talkers-Navajo-Code-Talkers-in-WWII>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/CASUALTIES-at-PELELIU-Wind-Talkers-Navajo-Code-Talkers-in-WWII>

Media Stream



Marine Weeps at Peleliu

During the vicious Battle of Peleliu, which was fought between Japanese and Allied soldiers, many men died.

This combat photo depicts a scene in the battle soon after a U.S. Marine has killed a Japanese opponent.

Combat photo online via the U.S. Naval Institute.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Marine-Weeps-at-Peleliu>

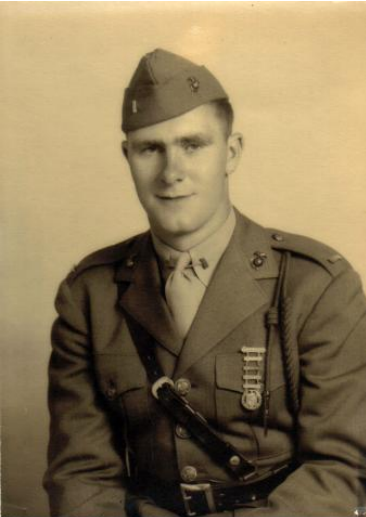


Peleliu - Japanese Defenses

Map 5 from the USMC (U.S. Marine Corps) Historical Monograph, *The Seizure of Peleliu*, Chapter III ("D-Day on Peleliu"), by Major Frank O. Hough, USMC.

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Captain Andrew Haldane - Commander of K/3/5

Photo online, courtesy U.S. Marine Corps.

Quoted passages from E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, pages 140-141.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Captain-Andrew-Haldane-Commander-of-K-3-5>

Snafu Shelton - The Pacific

Photo online, courtesy Eugene Sledge Collection, Auburn University Libraries.

Description of the photo, at Auburn University, is as follows:

Shown here are Eugene B. Sledge (right) with Merriell A. "Snafu" Shelton (left) and Paul Wright (middle) at a 1st Marine Division reunion in 1983 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. All three men were Marine Corps combat infantrymen in World War II. They fought the Japanese in the Pacific at Peleliu and Okinawa with the 1st Marine Division.



*Sledge and Snafu were buddies in the mortar platoon of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, 1st Marine Division. Sledge wrote a book about his combat experience called *With The Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa*.*

Publisher: Auburn University Libraries

Date: 1983

In-text photo of Merriell ("Snafu") Shelton with wife and two sons (Floyd and Allen), online courtesy Norwood Shelton via Find-A-Grave.

Excerpted passage from Rod Dreher at Beliefnet.com

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Snafu-Shelton-The-Pacific1>



Eugene Sledge - Video Biography

Clip from "Sledgehammer: Old Breed Marine," by Lou Reda Productions. Online, courtesy National Museum of the Marine Corps.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Eugene-Sledge-Video-Biography>



Eugene Sledge - Keeping Notes at Peleliu

Clip from "Sledgehammer: Old Breed Marine," by Lou Reda Productions. Online, courtesy The History Channel.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Eugene-Sledge-Keeping-Notes-at-Peleliu>



Eugene Sledge - End of Battle at Peleliu

Clip from "Sledgehammer: Old Breed Marine," by Lou Reda Productions. Online, courtesy The History Channel.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Eugene-Sledge-End-of-Battle-at-Peleliu>



Eugene Sledge - Battle of Okinawa

Clip from "[Sledgehammer: Old Breed Marine](#)," by [Lou Reda Productions](#). Online, courtesy National Museum of the Marine Corps.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Eugene-Sledge-Battle-of-Okinawa1>



Eugene Sledge - Life After the War

Clip from "[Sledgehammer: Old Breed Marine](#)," by [Lou Reda Productions](#). Online, courtesy The History Channel.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Eugene-Sledge-Life-After-the-War>