

Battle of Peleliu

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The **Battle of Peleliu**, codenamed **Operation Stalemate II** by the United States, was fought between the United States and the Empire of Japan in the Pacific Theater of World War II, from September–November 1944 on the island of Peleliu, present-day Palau. U.S. Marines of the First Marine Division and later soldiers of the U.S. Army's 81st Infantry Division, fought to capture an airstrip on the small coral island. This battle was part of a larger offensive campaign known as Operation Forager which ran from June–November 1944 in the Pacific Theater of Operations.

Major General William Rupertus, USMC—commander of 1st Marine Division—predicted the island would be secured within four days.^[2] However, due to Japan's well-crafted fortifications and stiff resistance,^[3] the battle lasted over two months. In the United States, it was a controversial battle because of the island's questionable strategic value and the high casualty rate, which exceeded all other amphibious operations during the Pacific War.^[4] The National Museum of the Marine Corps called it "the bitterest battle of the war for the Marines".^[5]

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Battle of Peleliu

Part of World War II, Pacific War



15 September 1944: The first wave of LVTs approach the beaches during the American assault on Peleliu.

Date	15 September – 27 November 1944
Location	Peleliu, Palau Islands <p>7°00′N 134°15′E﻿ / ﻿7.000°N 134.250°E﻿ / 7.000; 134.250</p>
Result	American victory

Belligerents

 United States
 Empire of Japan

Commanders and leaders

 William H. Rupertus
 Kunio Nakagawa †

 Paul J. Mueller
 Sadae Inoue

 Roy S. Geiger

 Herman H. Hanneken

 Harold D. Harris

Units involved

 III Amphibious Corps

- 1st Marine Division
- 81st Infantry Division

 Peleliu garrison

- 14th Infantry Division
- 49th Mixed Brigade
- 45th Guard Force

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Background

By the summer of 1944, victories in the Southwest and Central Pacific had brought the war closer to Japan, with American bombers able to strike at the Japanese main islands from air bases secured during the Mariana Islands campaign (June—August 1944). There was disagreement among the U.S. Joint Chiefs over two proposed strategies to defeat the Japanese Empire. The strategy proposed by General Douglas MacArthur called for the recapture of the Philippines, followed by the capture of Okinawa, then an attack on the Japanese mainland. Admiral Chester Nimitz favored a more direct strategy of bypassing the Philippines, but seizing Okinawa and Taiwan as staging areas to an attack on the Japanese mainland, followed by the future invasion of

Japan's southernmost islands. Both strategies included the invasion of Peleliu, but for different reasons.^[6]

The 1st Marine Division had already been chosen to make the assault. President Franklin D. Roosevelt traveled to Pearl Harbor to personally meet both commanders and hear their arguments. MacArthur's strategy was chosen. However, before MacArthur could retake the Philippines, the Palau Islands, specifically Peleliu and Angaur, were to be neutralized and an airfield built to protect MacArthur's right flank.

Preparations

Japanese

By the summer of 1944, Peleliu Island was occupied by about 11,000 Japanese of the 14th Infantry Division with Korean and Okinawan laborers. Colonel Kunio Nakagawa — commander of the Division's 2nd Regiment — led the preparations for the island's defense.

After their losses in the Solomons, Gilberts, Marshalls and Marianas, the Imperial Army assembled a research team to develop new island defense tactics. They chose to abandon the old tactic of stopping the enemy at the beach. The new tactics would only disrupt the landings at the water's edge and depend on an in-depth defense farther inland. Colonel Nakagawa used the rough terrain to his advantage, by constructing a system of heavily fortified bunkers, caves, and underground positions all interlocked into a "honeycomb" system. The old tactic of the “banzai charge” was also discontinued as wasteful of men and ineffective. These changes would force the Americans into a war of attrition requiring more and more resources.

Nakagawa's defenses were based at Peleliu's highest point, Umurbrogol Mountain, a collection of hills and steep ridges located at the center of Peleliu overlooking a large portion of the island, including the crucial airfield. The Umurbrogol contained some 500 limestone caves, inter-connected by tunnels. Many of these

Additional support units

- 46th Base Force

Additional support units

Strength

47,561^{[1]:36}

13,600^{[1]:37}

Casualties and losses

1,508 killed

10,900 killed,

6,635 wounded

202 captured^{[1]:89}

36 missing

1st Marine Division:

1,300 killed

5,450 wounded

36 missing

81st Infantry Division:

208 killed, 1,185

wounded^{[1]:89}

were former mine shafts that were turned into defense positions. Engineers added sliding armored steel doors with multiple openings to serve both artillery and machine guns. Cave entrances were built slanted as a defense against grenade and flamethrower attacks. The caves and bunkers were connected to a vast system throughout central Peleliu, which allowed the Japanese to evacuate or reoccupy positions as needed, and to take advantage of shrinking interior lines.

The Japanese were well armed with 81 mm (3.19 in) and 150 mm (5.9 in) mortars, and 20 mm (0.79 in) anti-aircraft cannons, and backed by a light tank unit and an anti-aircraft detachment.

The Japanese also used the beach terrain to their advantage. The northern end of the landing beaches faced a 30-foot (9.1 m) coral promontory which overlooked the beaches from a small peninsula, a spot later known to the Marines who assaulted it simply as "The Point". Holes were blasted into the ridge to accommodate a 47 mm (1.85 in) gun, and six 20 mm cannons. The positions were then sealed shut, leaving just a small firing slit to assault the beaches. Similar positions were crafted along the 2-mile (3.2 km) stretch of landing beaches.

The beaches were also filled with thousands of obstacles for the landing craft, principally mines and a large number of heavy artillery shells buried with the fuses exposed to explode when they were run over. A battalion was placed along the beach to defend against the landing, but they were meant to merely delay the inevitable American advance inland.

American

Unlike the Japanese, who drastically altered their tactics for the upcoming battle, the American invasion plan was unchanged from previous amphibious landings, even after suffering 3,000 casualties and two months of delaying tactics against the entrenched Japanese defenders at the Battle of Biak.^[7] On Peleliu, American planners chose to land on the southwest beaches, due to their proximity to the airfield on South Peleliu. The 1st Marine Regiment—commanded by Col. Lewis B. Puller—was to land on the northern end of the beaches. The 5th Marine Regiment—under Col. Harold D. Harris—would land in the center, and the 7th Marine Regiment—under Col. Herman H. Hanneken—would land at the southern end.

The division's artillery regiment—the 11th Marines—would land after the infantry regiments. The plan was for the 1st and 7th Regiments to push inland, guarding the 5th Regiment's left and right flank, and allowing them to capture the airfield located directly to the center of the landing beaches. The 5th Marines were to push to the eastern shore, cutting the island in half. The 1st Marines would push north into the Umurbrogol, while the 7th Marines would clear the southern end of the island. Only one battalion was left behind in reserve, with the Army's 81st Infantry Division available for support from Angaur, just south of Peleliu.



Japanese fortifications.



U.S. Marines in combat.

On 4 September, the Marines shipped off from their station on Pavuvu, just north of Guadalcanal, a 2,100-mile (3,400 km) trip across the Pacific to Peleliu. The Navy's Underwater Demolition Team went in first to clear the beaches of obstacles, while U.S. Navy warships began their pre-invasion bombardment of Peleliu on 12 September.

The battleships *Pennsylvania*, *Maryland*, *Mississippi*, *Tennessee* and *Idaho*, heavy cruisers *Columbus*, *Indianapolis*, *Louisville*, *Minneapolis* and *Portland*, and light cruisers *Cleveland*, *Denver* and *Honolulu*,^{[1]:29} led by the command ship *USS Mount McKinley* (AGC-7) subjected the tiny island, only 6 sq mi (16 km²) in size to a massive three-day bombardment, pausing only to permit air strikes from the three fleet, five light aircraft carriers, and eleven escort carriers with the attack force.^[8] A total of 519 rounds of 16 in (410 mm) shells, 1,845 rounds of 14 in (360 mm) shells, 1,793 500 lb (230 kg) bombs were dropped on the islands during this period.

The Americans believed the bombardment to be successful, as Rear Admiral Jesse Oldendorf claimed that the Navy had run out of targets.^[8] In reality, the majority of the Japanese positions were completely unharmed. Even the battalion left to defend the beaches was virtually unscathed. During the assault, the island's defenders exercised unusual firing discipline to avoid giving away their positions. The bombardment managed only to destroy Japan's aircraft on the island, as well as the buildings surrounding the airfield. The Japanese remained in their fortified positions, ready to attack the troops soon to be landing.

Battle

Landing

The Marines landed at 08:32 on 15 September; the 1st Marines to the north on "White Beach 1 and 2", and the 5th and 7th Marines to the center and south on "Orange Beach 1, 2, and 3".^{[1]:42–45} As the other landing craft approached the beaches, they were caught in a crossfire when the Japanese opened the steel doors guarding their positions and fired artillery. The positions on the coral promontories guarding each flank attacked the Marines with 47 mm guns and 20 mm cannons. By 09:30, the Japanese had destroyed 60 LVTs and DUKWs.

The 1st Marines were quickly bogged down by heavy fire from the extreme left flank and a 30 foot high coral ridge, "The Point".^{[1]:49} Colonel Chesty Puller narrowly escaped death when a dud high velocity artillery round struck his LVT. His communications section was destroyed on its way to the beach by a hit from a 47 mm round. The 7th Marines faced a cluttered Beach Orange 3, with natural and man-made obstacles, forcing the Amtracs to approach in column.^{[1]:52}

The 5th Marines made the most progress on the first day, due to cover provided by coconut groves.^{[1]:51} They pushed toward the airfield, but were met with Nakagawa's first counterattack. His armored tank company raced across the airfield to push the Marines back, but was



soon engaged by tanks, howitzers, naval guns and dive bombers. Nakagawa's tanks and escorting infantrymen were quickly destroyed.^{[1]:57}

At the end of the first day, the Americans held their 2-mile (3.2 km) stretch of landing beaches, but little else. Their biggest push in the south moved 1 mile (1.6 km) inland, but the 1st Marines to the north made very little progress because of the extremely thick resistance.^{[1]:42} The Marines had suffered 200 dead and 900 wounded. Rupertus, still unaware of his enemy's change of tactics, believed the Japanese would quickly crumble since their perimeter had been broken.^[9]

The airfield/South Peleliu

On the second day, the 5th Marines moved to capture the airfield, push toward the eastern shore.^{[1]:61} They



5th Marines on Orange Beach

ran across the airfield, enduring heavy artillery fire from the highlands to the north, suffering heavy casualties in the process. After capturing the airfield, they rapidly advanced to the eastern end of Peleliu, leaving the island's southern defenders to be destroyed by the 7th Marines.^{[1]:58}



A wounded Marine receives a drink

This area was hotly contested by the Japanese, who still occupied numerous pillboxes. Heat indices^[10] were around^[11] 115 °F (46 °C), and the Marines soon suffered high casualties from heat exhaustion. Further complicating the situation, the Marines' water was distributed in empty oil drums, contaminating the water with the oil residue.^[12] Still, by the eighth day

the 5th and 7th Marines had accomplished their objectives, holding the airfield and the southern portion of the island, although the airfield remained under threat of sustained Japanese fire from the heights of Umurbrogol Mountain until the end of the battle.^[8]

American forces put the airfield to use on the third day. L-2 Grasshoppers from VMO-1 began aerial spotting missions for Marine artillery and naval gunfire support. On 26 September (D+11), Marine F4U Corsairs from VMF-114 landed on the airstrip. The Corsairs began dive-bombing missions across Peleliu, firing rockets to open cave entrances for the infantrymen, and dropping napalm; it was only the second time the latter weapon had been used in the Pacific. Napalm proved useful, burning away the vegetation hiding spider holes and usually killing their occupants.

The time from liftoff to the target area for the Corsairs based on Peleliu Airfield was very short, sometimes only 10 to 15 seconds. Consequently, there was nearly no time for pilots to raise the aircraft undercarriage; most pilots did not bother and left them on during the strike. After the strike was completed and the payload dropped, the Corsair simply turned back into the landing pattern again.

The Point

The fortress at the end of the southern landing beaches (a.k.a. “The Point”) continued to cause heavy casualties due to enfilading fire from heavy machine guns and anti-tank artillery across the landing beaches. Puller ordered Captain George P. Hunt, commander of K Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, to capture the position. He approached The Point short on supplies, having lost most of his machine guns while approaching the beaches. Hunt's second platoon was pinned down for nearly a day in an anti-tank trench between fortifications. The rest of his company was endangered when the Japanese cut a hole in their line, surrounding his company and leaving his right flank cut off.^{[1]:49}



Front line warning sign on Peleliu
October 1944

However, a rifle platoon began knocking out the Japanese gun positions one by one. Using smoke grenades for cover, they swept through each hole, destroying the positions with rifle grenades and close-quarters combat. After knocking out the six machine gun positions, the Marines faced the 47 mm gun cave. A lieutenant blinded the 47 mm gunner with a smoke grenade, allowing Corporal Henry W. Hahn to launch a grenade through the cave's aperture. The grenade detonated the 47 mm's shells, forcing the cave's occupants out with their bodies lit aflame as well as their ammunition belts exploding around their waists. A fire team was positioned on the flank of the cave where the former occupants were shot down.

K Company had captured The Point, but Nakagawa counterattacked. The next 30 hours saw four major counterattacks against a sole company, critically low on supplies, out of water, and surrounded. The Marines soon had to resort to hand-to-hand combat and attrition warfare to fend off the Japanese attackers. By the time reinforcements arrived, the company had successfully repulsed all Japanese attacks, but had been reduced to 18 men, suffering 157 casualties during the battle for The Point.^{[1]:50–51} Hunt and Hahn were both awarded the Navy Cross for their actions.

Ngesebus Island

The 5th Marines—after having secured the airfield—were sent to capture Ngesebus Island, just north of Peleliu. Ngesebus was occupied by many Japanese artillery positions, and was the site of an airfield still under construction. The tiny island was connected to Peleliu by a small causeway, but 5th Marines commander Harris opted instead to make a shore-to-shore amphibious landing, predicting the causeway to be an obvious target for the island's defenders.^{[1]:77}

Harris coordinated a pre-landing bombardment of the island on September 28, carried out by Army 155 mm (6.1 in) guns, naval guns, howitzers from the 11th Marines, strafing runs from VMF-114's Corsairs, and 75 mm (2.95 in) fire from the approaching LVTs.^{[1]:77} Unlike the Navy's bombardment of Peleliu, Harris' assault on Ngesebus successfully killed most of the Japanese defenders. The Marines still faced opposition in the ridges and caves, but the island fell quickly, with relatively light casualties for the 5th Marines. They had suffered 15 killed and 33 wounded, and inflicted 470 casualties on the Japanese.

Bloody Nose Ridge

After capturing The Point, the 1st Marines moved north into the Umurbrogol pocket,^{[1]:81} named "Bloody Nose Ridge" by the Marines. Puller led his men in numerous assaults, but every one brought on severe



Marines waiting in their foxholes.

casualties by the Japanese. The 1st Marines were trapped within the narrow paths between the ridges, with each ridge fortification supporting the other with deadly crossfire.

The Marines took increasingly high casualties as they slowly advanced through the ridges. The



A Corsair drops napalm on Japanese positions atop Umurbrogol

Japanese again showed unusual fire discipline, striking only when they could inflict maximum casualties. As casualties mounted, Japanese snipers began to take aim at stretcher bearers, knowing that if two stretcher bearers were injured or killed, more would have to return to replace them, and the snipers could steadily pick off more and more Marines. The Japanese infiltrated the American lines at night to attack the Marines in their foxholes. The Marines built two-man foxholes, so one could sleep while the other kept watch for infiltrators.

One particularly bloody battle on Bloody Nose came when the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines—under the command of Major Raymond Davis—attacked Hill 100. Over six days of fighting, the battalion suffered 71% casualties. Captain Everett Pope and his company penetrated deep into the ridges, leading his remaining 90 men to seize what he thought was Hill 100. It took a day's fighting to reach what he thought was the crest of the hill, which was in fact another ridge, occupied by more Japanese defenders.

Trapped at the base of the ridge, Pope set up a small defense perimeter, which was attacked relentlessly by the Japanese throughout the night. The Marines soon ran out of ammunition, and had to fight the attackers with knives and fists, even resorting to throwing coral rock and empty ammunition boxes at the Japanese. Pope and his men managed to hold out until dawn came, which brought on more deadly fire. When they evacuated the position, only nine men remained. Pope later received the Medal of Honor for the action. (Picture of the Peleliu Memorial dedicated on the 50th anniversary of the landing on Peleliu with Captain Pope's name) (<http://static.panoramio.com/photos/large/81326046.jpg>)

The Japanese eventually inflicted 70% casualties on Puller's 1st Marines, or 1,749 men.^{[1]:66} After six days of fighting in the ridges of Umurbrogol, General Roy Geiger, commander of the III Amphibious Corps, sent elements of 81st Infantry Division to Peleliu to relieve the regiment.^{[1]:66} The 321st Regiment Combat Team landed on the western beaches of Peleliu—at the northern end of Umurbrogol mountain—on 23 September. The 321st and the 7th Marines encircled The Pocket by 24 Sept., D+9.^{[1]:75,81}

By October, the 7th Marines had suffered 46 per cent casualties and General Geiger relieved them with the 5th Marines.^{[1]:83} Col. Harris adopted siege tactics,^[1] using bulldozers and flame-thrower tanks, pushing from the north.^{[1]:83–84} On 30 Oct., the 81st Inf. Div. took over command of Peleliu, taking another six weeks, with the same tactics, to reduce The Pocket.^{[1]:85}

On 24 November, Nakagawa proclaimed "Our sword is broken and we have run out of spears". He then burnt his regimental colors and performed ritual suicide.^{[1]:86} He was posthumously promoted to lieutenant general for his valor displayed on Peleliu. On 27 November, the island was declared secure, ending the 73-day-long battle.^[9]

A Japanese lieutenant with his 26 2nd Infantry soldiers and eight 45th Guard Force sailors held out in the caves in Peleliu until April 22, 1947 and surrendered after a Japanese admiral convinced them the war was over.^{[1]:81}

Aftermath

The reduction of the Japanese pocket around Umurbrogol mountain has been called the most difficult fight that the U.S. military encountered in the entire war.^[12] The 1st Marine Division was severely mauled and it remained out of action until the invasion of Okinawa on 1 April 1945. In total, the 1st Marine Division suffered over 6,500 casualties during their month on Peleliu, over $\frac{1}{3}$ of their entire division. The 81st Infantry Division suffered nearly 3,300 casualties during their tenure on the island.

Postwar statisticians calculated that it took US forces over 1500 rounds of ammunition to kill each Japanese defender, and that during the course of the battle, the Americans expended 13.32 million rounds of 30-calibre, 1.52 million rounds of 45-calibre, 693,657 rounds of 50-calibre bullets, 118,262 hand grenades and approximately 150,000 mortar rounds.^[8]

The battle was controversial due to the island's lack of strategic value and the high casualty rate. The defenders lacked the means to interfere with potential US operations in the Philippines,^[8] and the airfield captured on Peleliu never played a key role in subsequent operations. The high casualty rate exceeded all other amphibious operations during the Pacific War.^[4]

Instead, the Ulithi Atoll in the Caroline Islands was used as a staging base for the invasion of Okinawa. In addition, few news reports were published about the battle because Rupertus' prediction of a "three days" victory motivated only six reporters to report from shore. The battle was also overshadowed by MacArthur's return to the Philippines and the Allies' push towards Germany in Europe.

The battles for Angaur and Peleliu showed Americans the pattern of future Japanese island defense which would be seen again at Iwo Jima and Okinawa.^[13] Naval bombardment prior to amphibious assault at Iwo Jima was only slightly more effective than at Peleliu, but at Okinawa the preliminary shelling was much improved.^[14] Frogmen performing underwater demolition at Iwo Jima confused the enemy by sweeping



Marine Pfc. Douglas Lighthouse (right) cradles his .30 caliber (7.62×63mm) M1919 Browning machine gun in his lap, while he and Pfc. Gerald Thursby Sr. take a cigarette break, during mopping up operations on Peleliu on 14 September 1944.



Marines in a hospital on Guadalcanal after being wounded in the Battle of Peleliu

both coasts, but later alerted Japanese defenders to the exact assault beaches at Okinawa.^[14] American ground forces at Peleliu gained experience in assaulting heavily fortified positions such as they would find again at Okinawa.^[15]

On the recommendation of Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., the planned occupation of Yap Island in the Caroline Islands was canceled. Halsey actually recommended that the landings on Peleliu and Angaur be canceled, too, and their Marines and soldiers be thrown into Leyte Island instead, but was overruled by Nimitz.^[16]

In popular culture

Battle of Peleliu is featured in many World War II themed video games including Call of Duty: World at War. The player takes the role of a US Marine forced to take Peleliu Airfield, repel counter-attacks, destroy machine-gun and mortar positions and eventually secure Japanese artillery emplacements. In flight-simulation game War Thunder, two teams of players clash to hold the southern and northern airfields. In multi-player shooter Red Orchestra 2: Rising Storm, a team of American troops attack the defensive Japanese team's control points.

The battle including footage and stills are featured in the fifth episode of Ken Burns' *The War*.

The battle features in Episodes 5, 6 and 7 of the TV mini-series *The Pacific*.

Honors and recognitions

The nation's highest award, the Medal of Honor, was presented to eight Marines in the fight for Peleliu, five of whom were decorated posthumously (indicated by *):

- Corporal Lewis K. Bausell, 1st Battalion 5th Marines (1/5)*
- Private First Class Arthur J. Jackson, 3rd Battalion 7th Marines (3/7)
- Private First Class Richard E. Kraus, 8th Amphibian Tractor Battalion*
- Private First Class John D. New, 2nd Battalion 7th Marines (2/7)*
- Private First Class Wesley Phelps, 3rd Battalion 7th Marines (3/7)*
- Captain Everett P. Pope, USMC, 1st Battalion 1st Marines (1/1)
- Private First Class Charles H. Roan, 2nd Battalion 7th Marines (2/7)*
- First Lieutenant Carlton R. Rouh, 1st Battalion 5th Marines (1/5)

The Peleliu Battlefield was listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1985.^[17]

See also

- Damien Parer, Australian war photographer killed on September 17 while filming a Marine advance.^[18]
- USS *Peleliu*, an amphibious assault ship named in memory of the battle.
- *With the Old Breed*, a memoir of the battle written by Eugene Sledge.
- *Hell in the Pacific: A Marine Rifleman's Journey From Guadalcanal to Peleliu* written by Jim



Richard Kraus* killed in action, aged 18.

McEnery

- *Helmet for My Pillow*, a memoir of the battle written by Robert Leckie.
- *Islands of the Damned*, a memoir including the battle written by Romus Burgin.
- *The Pacific (miniseries)*
- *The Breaking Jewel*, a novel by Makoto Oda, translated by Donald Keene, which looks at the battle from the Japanese perspective
- *Battleground Pacific: A Marine Rifleman Combat Odyssey in K/3/5*, a memoir of the battle written by Sterling Mace, Nick Allen.
- *Victory At Peleliu, The 81st Infantry Division's Pacific Campaign* by Bobby C. Blair and John Peter DeCioccio.
- *Call of Duty: World at War*

Notes

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External links

- Anderson, Charles R. *Western Pacific*



Wikimedia Commons has media related to ***Battle of Peleliu***.

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