

International Journal of Naval History

December 2005

Volume 4 Number 3

Derrick Wright, *To The Far Side of Hell: The Battle for Peleliu, 1944*, Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2005. Bibliography, illustrations, maps, appendices, index. 176 pages.

Reviewed by David A. Manning

Senior Military Collections Analyst

LGB & Associates, Inc.

USA

The ferocious island battles fought by American Soldiers and Marines against the Japanese during the Pacific campaigns of the Second World War have become legendary. However, many of the details of the lesser-known invasions, such as the one that ultimately led to the capture of Peleliu, have been largely overshadowed by more famous operations, such as Iwo Jima and Okinawa. I would even admit that after spending years studying the battles, I knew more about the famous Tom Lea paintings of Peleliu than I did the actual fighting. Derrick Wright's book does an excellent job of helping to fill in some of those potential gaps in our collective knowledge about the island-hopping campaigns of World War II.

Peleliu lies near the southwestern tip of the Palau Island chain in the Southwest Pacific. Like most of the Pacific islands, Peleliu is rugged, with dense vegetation, and surrounded by coral reefs. Plans to invade the Palaus had been drawn up early in 1944 under the code-name Operation Stalemate. The islands were viewed as a potential thorn in the side of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's planned recapture of the Philippines. Events elsewhere in both the Central and Southwest Pacific areas overtook the original plans for the Palaus before the operation began. In the end, Operation Stalemate II, which began on

15 September 1944, included only an invasion of Peleliu and the smaller island of Angaur.

To The Far Side of Hell begins by providing a detailed overview of the events leading up to Operation Stalemate, of the overall course of the war, and of the specific operations linked to the invasion. The personalities, organizations, and units involved, both American and Japanese, are all sufficiently described. In particular, the US 1st Marine Division, which conducted the Peleliu invasion and suffered horrendous casualties as a result, is given a very detailed treatment in the book. The author also provides good information about the US Army's 81st Infantry Division, which assaulted the neighboring island of Angaur and assisted the Marines on Peleliu. Although this is an account of primarily ground combat operations, related naval operations such as Desecrate I, the US Navy's Task Force 58 raids against Japanese forces in the Palaus in March 1944, are included as well.

Besides providing a well-written description of the operations in the Palaus, the author also offers some critical analysis of the decisions that lead to the operation and of the leadership during the actual fighting. Mr. Wright's conclusions, which are generally supported by the available documentation and other scholarship on the subject, are that Stalemate II was, by late 1944, unnecessary and ill conceived. Planning for the operation was left to the staff of the 1st Marine Division, unlike similar operations planned from CINCPAC headquarters in Hawaii. The forces available for Stalemate II were also inadequate for the task, with not enough men to ensure success and too little shipping to transport them. Inaccurate intelligence and a one-day pause in the preparatory naval and air bombardment of Peleliu also added to the burden of the attacking Marines. Why Adm. Chester Nimitz allowed it to take place remains somewhat of a mystery.

The author also addresses another controversy related to the Peleliu operations, the leadership of the US 1st Marine Division commander, Maj. Gen. William H. Rupertus. Although a veteran of Haiti and China, by the time Rupertus assumed command of the Division in March 1943, he had apparently earned the nickname "Rupe

the Stupe” (40). Wright’s depiction of Rupertus is of an unimaginative, uncommunicative leader with little understanding of evolving Japanese defensive tactics and a penchant for erratic behavior. This seems to be supported by the examples given in the book, such as Rupertus’ inexplicable absence during the planning of Stalemate, his admonition to his regimental commanders to refuse to obey orders from his assistant, Brig. Gen. Oliver P. Smith once the Division was ashore, and finally his astonishing prediction on the eve of the invasion that “We’ll be through in three days – it may only take two” (55). The fighting on Peleliu was to last 71 days.

Overall the book provides a thoughtful and detailed description of the Peleliu and Angaur operations, addressing all aspects of the battles and including many well-placed personal reminiscences from veterans. The book is a quick read, but filled with information that should prove useful to anyone studying the Pacific War or littoral warfare in general. My only criticism would be the lack of notes referencing the numerous quotations and statistics. In the end, the original intention to use Peleliu as an airbase to support operations in the Philippines, Formosa, and China never came to fruition. This knowledge makes the book’s descriptions of the bloody fighting amongst the jagged coral of Peleliu even more profound.



The Editors
International Journal of Naval History
editors@ijnhonline.org

© Copyright 2005, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved