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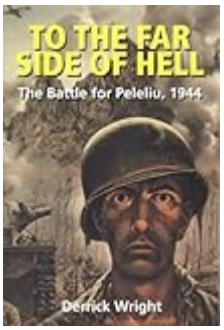

Derrick Wright. *To the Far Side of Hell: The Battle for Peleliu, 1944.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 176 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5281-3.

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Making Memory Permanent

Derrick Wright has crafted a clearly written and organized narrative about one of the hardest-fought but least-recognized battles of World War II. His narrative begins with an insightful strategic overview of the impending campaign (code named Stalemate) and then traces, step by step, the operational and tactical maneuvers that resulted in the 1st Marine Division's amphibious landing on 15 September 1944 and horrendous struggle on Peleliu in the Palau Islands, 500 miles east of the Philippines. As part of Stalemate, the U.S. Army's 81st Division concurrently attacked an island next door, Angaur, and subsequently supported and finally relived the 1st Marine Division on Peleliu. The battle lasted seventy-five days, until 25 November1944. Like all battles, its conduct was beset by "friction" and the "fog of war." After making allowances for the inevitable chaos of battle, Wright justly criticizes the 1st division's commander, Major General William Rupertus, for his military conduct of the battle. By contrast, Wright shows the regimental commanders, the most famous of which was Lt. Col. Lewis "Chesty" Puller, to have acted with courage, decisiveness, and due regard for their soldiers' lives even though the smothering fire of the Japanese destroyed entire platoons, companies, and battalions. It was not within the author's purview to provide the same detailed analysis of Japanese strategy, operations, and tactics as he did for those of the United States.

Wright tries to wrest the battle of Peleliu and Angaur from out of its obscure past and to put it into the historical niche he thinks it deserves. How obscure is this battle? To what extent has the battle impinged on the consciousness of the American public, particularly that portion of it that reads, watches, visits, or attends each new documentary, movie, book, exhibit, monument, or museum about some aspect of World War II? Judging by President Harry Truman's inability to pronounce Peleliu (puh-LEE-luh-ooh) as he decorated one of the battle's warriors with the Medal of Honor, it was and has remained pretty obscure.

Although obscurity is a relative term, Peleliu was fought from 15 September to 25 November 1944 below the radar beam of both journalists and the American public and has remained in the shadow of other Pacific battles waged before, during, and after. The war in the Pacific was fought in a thousand obscure places, obscure anyway

to an American public whose westward gaze penetrated barely to the beaches of Waikiki. Simply put, Peleliu did not then and has not yet met the celebrity test. It wasn't a "first" like Guadalcanal, nor tropically alluring like a Bougainville or Tarawa. Peleliu was neither dramatic, like "I-shall-return" Leyte, nor iconic, like Iwo Jima's Mt. Suribachi. Nor was it close to Japan's shoreline, like Okinawa. Nestled at the southern end of the Palau Islands, Peleliu was just another South Sea Island, one that lacked a Rodgers and Hammerstein to immortalize it.

Denied celebrity status by both journalists and the public, Peleliu has been relegated to a secondary ranking by Marine Corps historians, too. In the pantheon of transcendent 1st Marine Division engagements, would any historian place it ahead of Beaulieu Wood, Guadalcanal, Okinawa, Inchon or "Frozen Chosin"? Puller, who fought in most 1st Division battles in World War II and Korea, did not understate Peleliu's gritty difficulty and slaughter, but all of the division's battles (except for Inchon) were bloody messes. Peleliu was a hell of a fight; the cause was just; bravery became ordinary. At the risk of sounding callous: so what?

As Wright convincingly demonstrates, it was an unnecessary battle. Strategically, Peleliu was not critical to the success of either Nimitz's or MacArthur's respective campaigns across the Pacific. The purpose for JCS authorizing the Peleliu campaign was to deny the use of its airfield to Japanese fighters and bombers, a task necessary to secure MacArthur's eastern flank if and when he returned to the Philippines via Mindanao. By the time the 1st Marines stormed ashore on 15 September 1944, that rationale had disappeared. At that point, the decision to attack or not to attack Peleliu had been delegated solely to Admiral Chester Nimitz. Apparently Nimitz knew that the ostensible justification for neutralizing Peleliu had lost intensity. Because of intelligence delivered to Nimitz and MacArthur by Admiral Halsey, the island of Mindanao could now be safely hopped over in favor of attacking Leyte in October, 1944. In the new scenario, Peleliu was no longer a factor. It could have been hopped over, too.

So why didn't Nimitz stop the authorized, planned, but now unnecessary attack? Wright is unable to shed any new light on either the admiral's motives or reasoning. Neither then nor later did Nimitz explain his decision. His reasoning remains obscure. By all accounts, Nimitz was neither bloodthirsty nor uncaring; he committed his soldiers and sailors judiciously. Nor was he seeking publicity while carving another notch on his service revolver's grip. Nimitz tended to deflect media attention in the direction of Spruance, Halsey, Turner, Mitscher, and Smith. Nor was Nimitz asleep at the wheel. Nimitz's biographer made no estimate of Nimitz's intentions or reasoning and concluded only that "[i]t is questionable whether the advantages gained offset the terrible cost."[1]

While attempting to bring belated recognition to the battle for Peleliu, Wright also seeks to celebrate the heroism of the Marines and GIs who fought there. It was not an unopposed landing. The Japanese had prepared an in-depth defense that began at the shoreline and occupied well-designed positions from which, in one case, the Japanese were able to enfilade and nearly destroy Puller's 1st Marine regiment. Each day, from D-Day to D+71, gutsy Americans fought against unrelenting Japanese troops. American soldiers killed more than 10,000 Japanese soldiers entrenched in 500 caves and prepared bunkers, seemingly one at a time, belt buckle to belt buckle. American deaths were nearly 1,800 on Peleliu and Angaur combined. With the addition of more than 5,500 wounded, injured, and diseased, the 1st Marine Division lay shattered. After the campaign was closed on 25 November 1944, groups of Japanese soldiers continued sporadic resistance. Twenty-six surrendered in 1947, adding to the two hundred who had surrendered in 1944. The last Japanese soldier emerged from his rocky bunker in 1954, finally ending "a battle that should be remembered with awe in America's military annals" (Wright, 163).

Wright is not the first writer to utter, "Remember Peleliu." In 1991 Bill Ross wrote a book about Peleliu that carried the subtitle: "The Untold Story of the Pacific War's Forgotten Battle." Although Wright's book is a less hagiographic and more complete historical analysis than Ross's, it suffers from some of the same deficits; at least they are deficits from my perspective as an academic historian. Neither delves into Japanese decisions, objectives and actions sufficiently to provide a 360-degree analysis of the campaign. Neither uses the customary scholarly apparatus such as footnotes, end notes, or explanatory addenda that allow the inquisitive reader to track an author's arguments back to the sources. Their respective bibliographies list a few first-hand accounts and some secondary sources, but there is no differentiation among them nor is there a critical discussion as to their relative merits, strengths, and weaknesses. (Although Wright lists Ross's book in his bibliography, he does not include its full, significant subtitle.) Overall, their respective points of view are quite similar. Both authors em-

phasize the heroism of the American soldiers who fought there. Both point an accusing finger at General Rupertus, and both question the necessity of the battle having been fought and lives squandered. Ross pulls no punches: "Peleliu should have been bypassed and never invaded at all."[2] Wright does include some sketches done by the artist and combat correspondent, Tom Lea, perhaps best known for his painting, "The Two-Thousand-Yard Stare," placed on the paperback version's cover. It is a painting that delivers a visceral punch, reminding us that combat trauma has been experienced in as many ways as there are soldiers who have fought.

Notes

[1]. E. B. Potter, *Nimitz* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1976), p. 325.

[2]. Bill D. Ross, *Peleliu: Tragic Triumph: The Untold Story of the Pacific War's Forgotten Battle* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 339.