from Col Stephenson

PELELIU

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Although H Hour had been tentatively set for 0830, there was no late sleepers aboard the transport, Reveille was at 0630, and no one needed to be urged twice to hit the deck. For approximately two-thirds of these First Division Marines, D Day was no new experience. They had been through the four months hell on Guadalcanal and the less costly but equally miserable campaign in the jungles of New Britain. The other third were replacements recently out of the States, most of them without previous combat experience.

There was surprisingly little tension, despite the fact that Peleliu was known to be defended by a sizable number of the Empire's best troops. Part of this confidence was undoubtedly due to the bill of goods we had sold ourselves — to the effect that Navy shelling and aerial bombardment prior to the actual landing would reduce the island and its inhabitants to a rubbel before the we went ashore. As one Marine coffee fiend put it, "Hell, I'm going ashore, find a tin can and make me some Joe. There won't be any Japs when the Navy finishes".

Consequently when we piled into the LCVPs at about 0530, most of us were more concerned about seeing the highly-advertised bombing and shelling than we were with going ashore. We had plenty of time to wait, inasmuch as the big show would not reach its full fury until about 0730. We wondered at the time why we were put into the boats at such an early hour, only to be tossed around by a rolling Pacific until 0930. The best explanation seemed to be that we had to leave the transports at dawn in order to present a less concentrated target to the enemy, and also to enable the transports to leave the area if such action became necessary. At any rate, the constant rolling motion made life miserable for the boys with weak stomachs. Breakfast had consisted of a bountiful helping of fried potatoes plus a small fried steak, and while at the time this heavy meal seemed an excellent choice, many had reason to regret having eaten it a few hours later.

The pre-invasion show lived up to all our expectations. While we were still many miles out from the long, ridge-pocked island that was Peleliu we could see a pall of smoke begin to rise over the southern end of the island, where, as we knew from month's of map study, Peleliu's valuable air port was located. And as both we and H Hour approached, the intensity of the barrage steadily in-

creased. Battleships were pumping in their destructive 14 inch shells, cruisers and destroyers fired their smaller but powerful stuff, and LCI gunboats fired their colorful rockets. The cumulative effect on shore was a blanket of smoke that completely obliterated our objective, plus a frequent burst of flame that indicated a direct hit on some target. At H minus 30 the Naval planes began a systematic and thorough bombing and strafing process which promised to finish off what few Japs had survived the shelling.

Soon afterward we had our first reaction to violent death. In the midst of a fascinating display of aerial might, one of our Hellcats suddenly burst into flame and disappeared beyond the distant horizon. The effect of this tragedy on all of us was immediately apparent, and the most frequently heard comment was "He never knew what hit him". We later learned that this was the only plane lost in the initial bombardment. But we knew now, with a sudden awakening, that we were at war — the show was about over.

Our battalion had been designated as regimental reserve, which meant that we would not land until about an hour after H Hour, or at 0930. Because of the treacherous shallow reefs surrounding Peleliu we had to transfer from our boats well out from the shore and get into amphibian tractors — the famous Buffalos and Alligators. These vehicles, being tracked, can cross a coral reef which will stop an ordinary landing boat. They are much smaller than the LCVPs, and consequently the occupants are pretty much cramped, especially when everyone tries to lie on the deck to escape enemy fire. And it was apparent soon after we had transferred to the tractors that not all the Japs on Peleliu were dead. For one thing, we saw several of the tractors which had taken in the assault troops wrecked and in flames along the beach. But an even more impressive reminder was the mortar fire which began to land around us when we were still several hundred yards from the shore. I think anyone who made this or a similar landing will agree that this approach to the beach through a mortar and artillery barrage is the most terrifying experience of a lifetime. There is a feeling of helplessness which is born out of the realization that one can do nothing to protect himself. Once ashore, there is cover and concealment from the enemy, but out here your fate rests entirely with the Almighty — and the accuracy of a Jap gunner far out of reach. The ride through this barrage probably did not last more than two minutes at the most, yet it seemed the

proverbial eternity. It ended almost as quickly as it has begun; somebody yelled "let's go", and we tumbled over the side and ran for dear life — literally. We had made it, but the row of burning tractors testified that less lucky ones had not.

The first hour on the beach following an amphibious landing is always the most confusing phase of the operation, and Peleliu was no exception. Our battalion had been assigned an assembly area in which all hands were to meet immediately upon landing, but there were several factors which prevented the congregation from so gathering. In the first place, the landmarks, such as coconut trees, houses, etc., which had been constantly described and mapped out for us, had simply and completely disappeared. The terrific pounding from the ships and planes had leveled everything along the beach, leaving only tangled wreckage. Secondly, some of our troops were landed at points several hundred yards from where they had been told they would land, and consequently they were temporarily lost. But the most important reason we could not go into our assembly area, which was three hundred yards inland, was that the assault battalions, which had expected to proceed inland five hundred yards and set up a perimeter, were in actuality pinned down on the beach by an enemy which had withdrawn into his caves during the bombardment and then stepped out to greet the foe along the beaches. Consequently, my experience as I tried to proceed to the assembly area was typical: I had walked inland about fifty yards when I heard a rifleman say, "Hey, Mac, you'd better get down; this is the front line". It took us a little while to comprehend that all was not going as planned, but after about an hour we managed to collect most of the battalion in one area along the beach, and Major Davis (Major Raymond G. Davis, Atlanta, Ga.) ordered his men to dig in. The sand made digging easy, and we soon had our command post, switchboard and all, set up immediately in rear of the front lines.

I have mentioned that our battalion was in reserve, but it was evident almost immediately that we would be committed. This proved to be the case, and we enjoyed our supposedly "lucky" reserve position for less than two hours. And when we were committed we stayed committed — right down to the moment we were relieved eight days later.

As noon approached, the rumor got about that things were not

going at all well, so we improved our beach position in anticipation of staying there for awhile. The beach was not a pleasant place. Jap mortar and artillery shells landed around us constantly, and some of them took a heavy toll. Fortunately for us, the Japs seemed to have an obsession towards shelling the fringing reef off shore, and the vast majority of their shells fell harmlessly on the reef. Had our enemy been smart enough to bring his barrage two hundred yards inshore, the effect would have been terrible for us. Why he didn't is one of those things that will probably remain unexplained.

By 1600 we knew we were in for a night on the beach and began to make preparations accordingly. These activities were interrupted by a flash message announcing a Jap tank attack. Major Stevenson (Major Nikolai S. Stevenson, New York City) immediately set up a tank defense which employed the full list of anti-tank weapons — 37MM gun, Bazooka, rifle grenade and even a Sherman tank with its 75MM cannon. The Japs did try a tank attack, coming from across the airport, but it was successfully stopped by front-line units. One tank was knocked out directly in front of us by a Bazookaman in the company commanded by Ev Pope (Captain Everett P. Pope, Quincy, Mass.) who was to become one of the really great heroes of the campaign. Later on we had a chance to observe the wrecked Jap tank and were amazed at its small size and lack of effective armor. It was considerably smaller than our own light tanks and certainly no match for a Sherman. This tank attack was the only serious threat of the first day, although we were in for a night of fear and anxiety, due to the prevalent opinion that things had gone very badly this first day.

Nobody ate much that first day, and most of us crawled into our holes at about dusk hoping that daylight would not be too long in coming. The front-line companies were constantly on the alert during the night, and there was considerable firing, but the Japs made no serious attempt at counter-attacking. In the Command Post it was relatively quiet, although snipers made life unpleasant by firing over our heads throughout the night. There is something about sniper fire in the still of the night that makes it seem more dangerous than it actually is. The bullets crack so loudly as they pass over you that they seem to be fired from just outside your hole, whereas they probably were fired from several hundred yards away. It was with a feeling of great relief that we saw the

first streaks of dawn the next morning. We knew we could beat the Japs in the daytime, but they were an awful nuisance at night.

We stayed on the beach until noon of the second day, most of us constantly fretting and hoping to get further inland. The mortar fire had not abated, and we all knew that safer positions could be found if we moved inland. As a result we were elated when Major Davis told us to prepare to move, and shortly after noon we shoved off in our first real offensive action of the campaign. The going was not easy, but the companies did a wonderful job, and by about 1600 we had secured a much better position and prepared our command post installation for the night. Our new location gave mute evidence of the bitter battle that had preceded us. Dead marines and dead Japs lay side by side, and there were enough abandoned weapons to equip a rifle company. We were still close enough to the beach to be on sandy soil, and so our digging in was once more accomplished quickly and effectively. We again retired to our holes at dusk and most of us rested a little more than we had the previous night, despite the fact that machine guns and BARs were firing a protective line all night long. Again the Japs failed to make an effective counter-attack.

The third morning (Sunday) saw us take the offensive again, and our battalion made its most substantial gains of the campaign during this day. The rifle platoons and supporting units swept across several hundred yards of wooded terrain, all the way to the base of the ridges which we knew would be the real testing ground. Naval gunfire knocked out a huge Jap blockhouse early in the morning, and the battalion command post moved into the recently vacated quarters. It proved to be an ideal set-up, and this pile of steel and concrete was destined to be our home for the next four days and nights. The battalion surgeon, Lt. (jg) Charles E. Schoff, of Sacramento, Cal., soon had his sick bay set up in the blockhouse, and together with his assistant, Lt.(jg) Robert F. Hagerty, of Boston, handled and evacuated an amazingly large number of patients in the next few days. We soon made the blockhouse a communications center, too, for it afforded much-needed shelter for both our telephone central and the radios. An effort was made to ban everyone except medical workers and communicators, but inasmuch as it offered about the only protection from a broiling sun, the blockhouse soon became the center of practically all activity in the area. Majors Davis and Stevenson shunned this crowded and

noisy place and set up their command post in a large hole across the road, covering it with a piece of tin and an abandoned shelter half.

During the afternoon of our first day in this area, I saw what I consider the greatest display and courage and bravery I could ever conceive. PFC Thorval Pattee, of Sandy, Oregon, was a lineman attached to our mortar platoon, it being his job to lay telephone wire to front-line observation posts from the gun positions. At best this is dangerous work, for a wireman is always a prominent target, and on this particular day "Pat" was working in a constant barrage of mortar fire. His luck held out for a while, but suddenly a shell hit squarely beside him and mangled his left forearm. So badly was the arm severed that it hung to the elbow by only a few tendons and obviously was lost. Despite the severity of his wound, Pattee walked unaided for five hundred yards to the battalion aid station, where Dr. Hagerty immediately amputated the arm and sent him to a rear area. The sight of "Pat" walking into the aid station with his mutilated arm will never be forgotten by those of us who saw him. He even had the guts to wave his good arm and shake his fist at us as he was carried away. He didn't get any medals — not even a commendation — which is one reason why many of us would just as soon dispense with the medal market for the duration. Too many guys like Pat go back home and run into glamour boys bedecked with three rows of campaign ribbons.

We had our fill of experiences during the four-day stay at the blockhouse. Despite the fact that we were theoretically several hundred yards behind the front lines, we were constantly harassed by snipers and an occasional mortar shell. Apparently we were not visible to the Japs, for their mortar fire was inaccurate and did little damage. Operations went along normally during daylight hours, but not a single night passed without some kind of a scare. For example, at about 2100 the first night we spent there the quiet was broken by a series of shouts, followed almost immediately by a terrific explosion just outside our shelter. Instantly we heard the familiar cry of "Corpsman, Corpsman", and we knew that someone had been hit. It turned out that half-a-dozen Marines who had been sleeping just outside the principal window of the blockhouse had been wounded by a hand grenade — a grenade tossed by a Jap who had evaded all our sentries and the hundreds of sleeping Marines to reach the very center of our command post.

Had he thrown the grenade into the window, the effect would have been devastating, for about fifty of us were sleeping on hospital stretchers in a very small area. Needless to say, our guard was increased at once, both as to numbers and vigilance.

The following night we had a similar, but less serious, interruption of our sleep. At about midnight a number of us detected a very prominent sound coming from directly under us, the sound very obviously being made by some person or persons digging with pick and shovel. The explanation of this phenenonenon was relatively simple and yet wildly fantastic. Despite the fact that we had held the blockhouse for more than forty-eight hours, there was still at least one live Jap hiding in the rubble underneath it, and he undoubtedly hoped to dig his way out and give us the same hand grenade treatment we had experienced the night before. (We now began to suspect that last night's visitor had also been hiding in the same place). Fortunately we had demolitions personnel with us, and their decision was to clear the blockhouse and set off a substantial charge of T. N. T. under it. This was done, and we heard no further noises that night.

In view of later disclosures, it was not unusual that we should find Japs living directly under us many hours after we had secured a particular area. The entire island of Peleliu was infested with an amazing assortment of subterranean fortifications — caves, passageways and storerooms — which constituted a highly effective defense position. The Japs had held Peleliu for twenty-five years, and they must have spent most of the time in preparing their underground defenses. Certainly they did little toward improvement of living facilities, roads or sanitation on the island. Despite the fact that Peleliu boasted of a fine, modern airport, its roads were crude, narrow lanes which barely permitted the passage of two vehicles, although there was abundant coral on the island. Coral is an excellent native material for road-building, and American engineers and Seabees have constructed many fine four-land highways throughout Pacific islands using coral exclusively. In the field of sanitation, the Japs belied their homeland reputation of cleanliness. I saw not a single modern toilet or bit of plumbing on the island, although there may have been some near the airport. Their insect control was either absent or negligible, for flies, mosquitoes and sand fleas abounded, although there was apparently no malaria present. Only the cave system showed the re-

sult of hard work, the Japs seeming to prefer to live in filth and die like rats — coming out of their holes at night, withdrawing into hiding during daylight hours.

As I have mentioned previously, we stayed at the blockhouse for four days, during which time we made little progress against an enemy entrenched on the coral ridges ahead of us. When the order to move forward finally came, it was about 1600, so we knew that only a couple more hours of daylight remained in which we could make the move and set up for the night. Major Davis had selected for his new command post a position along the narrow road which ran at the base of the contested ridges. We arrived shortly before dark and found that things were not going well. Captain Pope's company held a favorable position on top of the ridge, and our other companies were in the lines, but there were wide gaps which had to be filled. At this point, Major Stevenson, who was doing an excellent job as Battalion executive officer, was able to secure a company of reinforcements from another regiment, and he personally placed them in the weak spots in the line long after darkness had fallen. As he finished this task he was caught in the middle of a fire fight between Japs on the ridges and our own troops, and his sprint down the road to the covered command post set some kind of a record.

Mention should be made here of the excellent job done by the battalion quartermaster, Lt. William Lobell, Bloomfield, N.J., in getting food, water, ammunition and other supplies up to the front from the beach. While none of us ate much the first few days, we soon got tired of C and K rations, which are not very good even under favorable conditions. On the fourth day we had our first hot meal; it had been prepared on the ships and sent ashore in huge containers. We also had an amazingly large amount of fruit juices — grapefruit, pineapple and tomato — reach us on the fourth day, and the providing of these juices was a wonderful morale builder. Most of us threw away the Cs and Ks and lived on a liquid diet for the next few days.

Water was a problem on Peleliu. There were no streams on the island, and the Japs had set up reservoirs for catching rainwater, which was their sole source of supply. These reservoirs were all destroyed before we arrived, either by the enemy or by our own bombing and shelling, so the only water we had was what we could

bring in. Each man landed with two filled canteens, and water was given a high priority on the list of supplies landed from the ships. It came in two types of containers — the familiar five gallon Army cans, and in 55 gallon gasoline drums, some of which retained their original flavoring. The quartermaster department kept this water coming to the front constantly, and as a result no one went thirsty for more than a very limited period. Some of the water had been "canned" for more than a month and tasted like patent medicine, but it had all been thoroughly treated and there was no ill-effect from drinking it.

On D plus seven we were committed to what was to be our final offensive action of the campaign. Casualties had reduced our effectives to a shockingly small number and we hardly dared call ourselves a battalion any more. Incidentally, many of these casualties were the result of extreme heat exhaustion, for there was no shade on the ridges, and the sun never once was hidden during our hardest fighting. Some of these heat-exhaustion cases were put back on their feet by administration of a saline solution intravenously, but many others were out for days.

Our mission was to assault and capture a hill which was later to become well-known as "Bloody-Nose Ridge". Several times the Marines had taken the hill, only to be forced to withdraw by a fanatical last ditch defense from Japs hidden in its many caves. Our command post moved forward once again, this time at 0700, and we set up in a large open field about 400 yards in rear of the ridge. There was little cover, but we found an abandoned steam roller and set up our switchboard and radios in the immediate vicinity. The Japs could spot us easily in our open position, and we had not been there for more than an hour when a terrific mortar barrage was centered on us. The steam roller was our sole protection, and about a dozen of us squeezed under it and prayed that it wouldn't sustain a direct hit. The barrage lasted about fifteen minutes, and then it lifted almost as suddenly as it had started. Why the enemy did not pursue this advantage in another thing we will never be able to understand. Possibly the mortar had been knocked out by our gunfire, but whatever happened, it saved the day for us.

Lt. Frank Rineer, of Philadelphia, and his company had been given the job of taking the ridge, and nobody envied them their as-

signment. The Japs could see them coming, and they couldn't see the Japs, so they went up on sheer guts alone. Their charge to the top of the hill was one of the bravest and yet most disastrous acts of the campaign. Despite the fact that he was twice wounded, Lt. Rineer reached the crest of the ridge, but only a handful of his company made it with him, and the smallness of their numbers made the position untenable. They came back down, and a stalemate set in which was to last for many days. The rest of the island was quickly secured, but Bloody-Nose ridge held out for several weeks.

The area in which this battle was fought was the center of a Jap supply dump. There were hundreds of cases of their famed Sake' wine, which tastes about like homemade Indiana dandelion wine. For some reason they bottle this wine in huge containers, about twice the size of our familiar quart-size beer bottles, and many a Marine found a bottle of Sake' too much to handle. Another odd discovery in the supply dump was the thousands and thousands of pure white handkerchiefs which our scavengers came across. They were not silk, but were of a good quality cotten or linen, and for days we used them as towels, cleaning rags and in numerous other ways. There was also a substantial quantity of foodstuff, most of which seemed to be canned Formosan pineapple. I tasted some of this pineapple, and it seemed to me to equal of finest quality Hawaiian pineapple. Oddly enough, the labels on the cans were printed in both Japanese and English.

As the day wore on we heard rumors that we were to be relieved by another outfit before darkness. These rumors were welcomed, for we had no sense of shame or failure concerning our part in the campaign. In making the gains we did we had suffered over 60% casualties, and those of us who were unharmed were pretty tired of it all. Consequently, when Major Davis verified that we were to be replaced in the lines, we began wearily to gather up what gear we had left and awaited the arrival of the fresh troops. At about 1600 they began to stream down the road, and by darkness they had been placed in the line to take over where we had left off. Our activities on Peleliu were not concluded, but the hard fighting was over for us. We walked back to a rear area with an increasingly realization that our numbers were pitifully small. In one week of action we had paid a price far greater than we had ever anticipated. War is not a pleasant business.....