



Marines on Peleliu. A Pictorial Record

Eric Hammel

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The American campaign in the western Pacific from the late summer 1944 to mid-1945 was a violent undertaking at every turn. The Japanese had been relentlessly pushed back throughout 1943 and 1944. Except for the western Caroline Islands, the Philippines, Formosa, a few islands near Japan, and Japan itself, there was very little left for them to defend. They had clearly lost their war of conquest in the Pacific and East Asia, but they could not bring themselves to settle gracefully; their warrior code prevented them from doing anything less than standing their ground—especially in their homeland—and dying.

The western Carolines would have been bypassed had the American drive into the Philippines not required an aviation stepping stone between American bases off western New Guinea and Mindanao, in the southern Philippines. A ready-made airfield on Peleliu, in the Palau Islands, thus became an objective to be invaded in the late summer of 1944. It was to be the site of a quick smash-and-grab combat landing modeled on a winning scheme that had seen to the successful ten-month American drive all across the central Pacific—at Tarawa, Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Saipan, Tinian, and Guam. Fast, efficient, easy; another in an unbroken string of American victories.

What could possibly go wrong?

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