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OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST MARINE DIVISION
AT PELELIU, PALAU ISLANDS
15 SEPTEMBER - 30 OCTOBER 1944
(WESTERN PACIFIC CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Rifle Company Commander)

Type of operation described: DIVISION IN AMPHIBIOUS
ATTACK

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ADVANCED INFANTRY OFFICERS CLASS NO. I

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OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST MARINE DIVISION
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INTRODUCTION

At the end of August 1944, the forces that had been driving through the Central Pacific were suffering from a dearth of troops. The Marianas Operation had so depleted their available divisions that the 7th Army Division was the only veteran division available for use in an operation. (1)

The one Marine Division that was capable of immediately undertaking an operation was the 1st Marine Division which was under the command of General Douglas MacArthur in the South-west Pacific Theater of Operations. Sometime before (2) this, a swap or trade had evidently materialized - sometime shortly after the 1st Division's completion of the Cape Gloucester (Map A) campaign under General Krueger of the 6th American Army. The Navy would regain the 1st Marine Division and use it to protect the Philippines Operation.

The situation was this: General MacArthur was finally almost in a position to realize his goal of the entire war from Port Moresby up through New Guinea; his "return to the Philippines." The Navy Command in the Central Pacific, with its troop paucity was in a position to readily conform to MacArthur's plans to retake the Philippines although they apparently would have preferred a thrust directly into the Ryukyus, had they had the necessary troops. (3)

It became readily apparent, when it was seen that this operation was mutually acceptable, that a base would be needed within fighter and light bomber range of the Philippines.

(1), (2), (3) A-9, p. 39-40.

(Map A) also it was very desirable, if not absolutely necessary that the Navy have a suitable anchorage in the Western Carolines for its supply trains. (4)

Upon a perusal of the maps, the Palaus (Map A) were thought to be consistent with the objectives, enumerated above. Peleliu and Auguar (Map B) offered locations for airfields and there was a deep water anchorage within the reef ^{to} the north, once Kossol Passage (Map B) was cleared of mines. This reef encircled the islands of the Palau Group with the exception of Auguar, and was seventy-seven (77) miles long and twenty (20) miles wide. Also in the Western Carolines were Yap and Ulithi (Map A) which were originally included in the plan. Ulithi had an excellent anchorage and was held only in battalion strength. Yap was a major base and was held by about 8,000 Japanese. (5)

The Palaus in the Jap's hands were also a potential threat to MacArthur's lines of communications for a Philippine operation. These islands are only about 530 miles east of the Southern Philippines and from there, the Japs could have harassed MacArthur's shipping, which would come primarily from the Admiralties and Dutch New Guinea. (6) (Map A).

The largest of the Palau group is Babelthuap ^{is} to the north of the chain, which was garrisoned by between 30,000 and 40,000 troops according to various estimates. However, this island was adaptable to a strong defense over a fair sized land mass, and its possession would not preclude Jap activity in the remainder of the Palaus. The possession of Peleliu and the operation of its airfield would permit us to neutralize the Palau chain. (7) (Map B)

(4), (5), A-9, p. 39-40; (6), A-8; (7) A-8, p. 297.

Peleliu itself is a low-lying, relatively flat island roughly six to seven miles in length and two miles wide at its widest point, which is on the south where the airfield is situated. It is a coral island surrounded by a shallow reef some three to seven hundred yards in width. It is somewhat in the shape of a "Y". The north-western peninsula, or upper left arm of the "Y", has a ridge or series of hills running along it. The upper right arm of the "Y" is low and swampy, covered in parts with dense mangrove. The airfield is situated on the main body of the "Y", where the island is widest. The nature of the terrain lent itself readily to airfield construction as the ground is porous and there was plenty of coral for surfacing. The hills unfortunately lent themselves readily to tunneling also. The coral structure had been worn by water to limestone, which was not too difficult for the Japanese to work with. The hills were permeated with numerous natural caves, and these were improved into strongpoints, observation and command points, living quarters, storage rooms, and tunnels. Some of these caves had as many as six to eight decks. Water could be obtained from the drippings off stalactites. There were numerous entrances which were protected by blast walls of coral or concrete. (8)

The enemy order of battle obtained in the Saipan Operation (Map A) indicated that there were roughly between 10,000 and 11,000 troops on Peleliu, consisting of Army and Navy elements.

The Japanese anticipated that the Western Carolines were to be attacked. They placed Lt. Gen. Inoue in command of (8), A-5, 17, 18.

Yap-Ulithi-Palau. He was very thorough in his planning and preparation as will later be seen. He was able to benefit from reports of Jap eyewitnesses of the Saipan Operation. He immediately withdrew the small force from Ulithi, and concentrated on preparations in the rest of his command. (9)

GENERAL SITUATION

The general situation was: the First Marine Division was to take Peleliu Island, and the 81st Army Division was ordered to take ^MAnguar (Map B). Airfields would be developed and of the remainder of the Western Carolines neutralized, ~~also~~ ^{thus} permitting air support of the Philippines Campaign. At any rate the right flank of this invasion would be secured. The idea of attacking and seizing Yap had been abandoned, but Ulithi was to be seized after the Peleliu-Anguar affairs, probably by the 81st Division as it was estimated that they would have only an infantry battalion, reinforced by four tanks and a battery of artillery. (10)

SPECIAL SITUATION PLANNING

The first official notice the First Marine Division had of the forthcoming operation was on the receipt of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Study, "Concept of the Palau Operation" on 3 June, 1944. (11)

After the New Britain campaign (Map A) the division went to Pavuvu Island, in the Russell Islands in May, 1944, and proceeded to build a new camp, as they had staged for the New Britain Operation in New Guinea; where, incidentally, they had also to construct a camp, thereby losing valuable time from training. (12).

(9) A-9, p. 41; (10) a-9, p. 43; (11) A-1, p. 1; (12) Personal Knowledge.

Here at Pavuvu, was initiated the first attempt at rotation in accordance with plans that had been published. Some 4,000 men and officers were replaced and shipped home. This, of course, left the division with quite a training problem on its hands. In addition to the normal attrition from the previous operation, it had to assimilate and train 4,000 additional new men, most of whom had had no prior combat service. However, it is deemed to have been beneficial to the morale of even those combat veterans whom it was impossible to rotate at this time. (13)

The concept of this operation was radically different from anything the division had yet encountered. The Guadalcanal operation had been primarily defensive with limited objective attacks only in jungle terrain. The Cape Gloucester (New Britain) Campaign had been fought solely in heavy jungle during the monsoon season. The Peleliu assault was to be an amphibious assault on a small coral island surrounded by a fringing reef. (14)

The Commanding General and his staff began their planning on the receipt of the concept. This operation called for the use of a variety of ocean-going vessels - APA'S, AP'S, APH'S, AK'S, LST'S, and LSD'S. All of these vessels were familiar to the division, but much training would be required to utilize them properly. (15)

It was planned to land the assault infantry battalions and the artillery in LVT'S (Amphibious Tractors) and DUKW'S (Amphibious Trucks). These amphibious vehicles would be transported to the landing area in LST'S (Landing Ships, Tanks) and embarked off shore through the bow doors. The

(13) Personal Knowledge; (14) A-9, p. 1; (15) A-1 and Personal Knowledge.

artillery, up to 105MM, could be unloaded ashore by the use of A-frames mounted on other DUKW'S.

The tanks would be loaded into LCT'S (Landing Craft, Tanks) transported in the LSD'S (Landing Ships, Dock) to the landing area. There the dry docks would be flooded, the LCT'S launched, and the LCT'S land the tanks on the fringing reefs. (16)

The overall troop command in the Palaus Operation would be III Phib (Amphibious) Corps, which was then engaged in the Marianas Operation. Corps' planning section had moved to Pearl Harbor to be near ^{the} III Amphibious Force (Navy). (17)

Because of a delay in the wind-up of the Marianas Operation the Palau Operation was delayed due to lack of shipping. A new-concept was formulated and issued to all commands. (18)

Rear Admiral Fort arrived at Pavuvu. He was Commander, Western Attack Force, and also commanded Group 5, Amphibious Force, Pacific Fleet. He, the Commanding General, Maj. General Wm. H. Rupertus, and their staff conferred on the division's scheme of maneuver. The Admiral was thereby enabled to determine the requirements on his force to place the division ashore. Landing sites and the possibility of clearing reef obstacles with the use of Navy underwater demolition teams were also the subject of discussion. (19)

The number of ships to be made available was a matter of much conjecture and it was not till 12 August, 1944 that this important matter was finally determined.

Details of boat allocation, the landing plan, and control of boat waves were ironed out with the commander of the transport division and his staff.

(16) A-1 and Personal Knowledge; (17) A-9, p. 2; (18)(19) A-1, p. 2.

Operation Plan, No. 1-44 of the 1st Division was issued on 15 August 1944 after Western Landing Force's Task Group 36.1 plan was received on 10 August. However, the division was not able to issue the communication annex, naval gunfire plan, and air support plan until 23 August because of a delay in the receipt of the higher echelon counterparts from Western Landing Force.

The division's operation plan called for three regiments landing abreast, on a 2200 yard beach on the south-west coast of Peleliu. They were to land in LVT's preceded by a wave of LVT(A)'S (Landing Vehicle Tracked, Armored). Fast carrier task forces were to begin strikes on D-9 and continue them through D Day. The naval support forces would bomb and shell the target from D-~~8~~ till the troops were established on the beach. (20)

The maneuver once ashore was organized with the 1st Marine Regiment and 5th Marine Regiment pivoting to the left and advancing to the north. The 7th Marine Regiment was to pivot to the right and clear out the southern portion of the island. Ngesebus (Map C) a small island containing a small, undeveloped airstrip, just off the north-western finger of Peleliu, would be attacked on order, probably by the division reserve. This reserve was to consist primarily of one battalion of the 7th Marines. (21)

Upon the capture of Peleliu, and Ngesebus, the plan called for the division to be relieved by Army Garrison Forces. (22)

On 5 August the division's Embarkation Warning Order was issued and loading began on 16 August. Seventeen transports (20) (21) (22), A-1, p. 3.

Plan should have been drawn graphically.

and two LSD'S were loaded by 26 August and thirty LST'S by 31 August.

TRAINING

Training actually began on 2 June on receipt of the concept of the operation and was handicapped from its inception by poor training areas and by the necessity of constructing the camp.

However June was devoted to small unit exercises and July saw the battalions and regiments conducting landing exercises. All units combat-fired their weapons and much work was done on tank-infantry-artillery coordination. (23)

The division was given the responsibility for organizing and training an amphibious tractor battalion and an armored amphibious tractor battalion. The shortage of tractors was alleviated by the arrival of the 8th Amphibious Tractor Battalion. (24)

The division's advanced training was completed in mid-August.

Two new weapons were received during this period. The first was the Navy Mk. I flame-thrower which was mounted on an LVT. The other was the shoulder fired mortar for firing mortar shells into embrasures, which had been developed by a Marine Warrant Officer. (25)

During this period, the infantry battalions formed assault platoons, roughly sixty men in the platoon, one platoon per battalion. The platoon was equipped with the battalion's flame-throwers, rocket-launchers, and demolition kits. The theory was that by pooling these weapons, their use could be concentrated wherever in the battalion they were most

(23) A-1, p. 4; (24) A-1, p. 5; (25) A-1, p. 6 and Personal Knowledge.

needed; and by augmenting the rifle platoons, assault teams could be thereby formed. In addition, fuel supply was a big problem for the flame throwers, and it was felt that some of the weapons would always be available with full loads by pooling them for maintenance and supply. The unit underwent intensive training, both in the mechanics of operating its weapons and in tactics with the rifle company. (26)

The vicinity of Pavuvu was thickly covered with rain forest (jungle), swampy in places and therefore poorly suited to the training of the division. These conditions necessitated the transporting of units to nearby islands for some phases of training. The boat supply was inadequate and sufficient boats were never obtained. (27)

The training of the division was climaxed by two division landing exercises with Task Force 32d in the Esperance area on Guadalcanal. (Map A) on 27-29 August. A shore party exercise was held at Tetere, Guadalcanal on 3 September. The landing exercise emphasized naval, air, and ground communications, control during ship-to-shore movement, regaining control ashore, and shore party control. (28)

THE APPROACH

The route of approach from Guadalcanal to Peleliu was generally parallel to the north coast of New Guinea. (Map A) and covered a distance of approximately 2,100 miles. The LST group left Guadalcanal on 4 September in a convoy with a speed of 7.7 knots. The transport group departed Guadalcanal on 8 September at a speed of 12.1 knots. (29)

Composition 1st Marine Division (Reinf.):

1. 1st Marine Regiment (Infantry)

(26) Personal Knowledge; (27) Personal Knowledge; (28) A-1, p. 7; (29) A-1, p. 8.

2. 5th Marine Regiment (Infantry)
3. 7th Marine Regiment (Infantry)
4. 11th Marine Regiment (Artillery)
5. 1st Tank Battalion
6. 1st Pioneer Battalion
7. 1st Motor Transport Battalion
8. 1st Service Battalion
9. 1st Medical Battalion
10. Division Headquarters Battalion

Attached:

1. 1st Amphibious Tractor Battalion
2. 6th Amphibious Tractor Battalion
3. 8th Amphibious Tractor Battalion
4. 3rd Armored Amphibious Tractor Battalion
5. 454th Amphibious Truck Company
6. 456th Amphibious Truck Company
7. Special Landing Craft Unit #32.
8. 3rd Bn, III Phib Corps Artillery (155 MM Howitzers)
9. 8th Bn, III Phib Corps Artillery (155MM Guns) - Btry. "C"
10. VMO-3
11. III Phib Corps Air Delivery Section
12. 4th Joint Assault Signal Company
13. 2nd Radio Intelligence Platoon
14. 4th War Dog Platoon
15. 5th War Dog Platoon
16. 5th Separate Wire Platoon
17. 6th Separate Wire Platoon
18. 12th Marine AAA Battalion
19. 17th Naval Construction Battalion
20. 33rd Naval Construction Battalion

21. 73rd Naval Construction Battalion
22. 16th Field Depot
23. VMF 114 (Ground echelon)
24. VMF 121 (Ground echelon)
25. VMF 122 (Ground echelon)
26. VMF (N) 541 (Ground echelon)
27. Argus 20
28. Garrison Beach Party (N)
29. Communication (N) A-3
30. Island Command (advance echelon) (30)

Total strength of the division (reinforced) embarked for Peleliu was 28,484.

The division was now trained, equipped, loaded and on its way. It was trained as well as its officers could train it with the facilities available. It was equipped as well as any troops anywhere have ever been equipped, limited only by shipping and time. Its weapons, clothing and accoutrements were the best that the most industrialized nation the world has ever known could produce.

There had been hitches in the training and equipping; they were still short 90 pack type flame-throwers. (31)

The characteristics of the various ships had not arrived in time to properly plan the loading with the result that plans had to be changed upon arrival of the ships for loading. (32)

It would be well to note here that ship's characteristics which are forwarded to a unit for planning purposes so often are different when the ship actually arrives on the scene. The ship has reserved a hold for ship's stores or (30) A-1, p. 10-11; (31) A-1, p. 20; (32) A-1, p. 20.

has loaded extra boats topside, thereby cutting down her cargo capacity; but has not bothered to enter these facts in the ship's characteristics.

Life aboard the LST'S was very tedious for the assault battalions enroute to Peleliu. The veterans were wondering if this was going to be as rough as Cape Gloucester or Guadalcanal. The new replacements were wondering if it would be as tough as the veterans said that Cape Gloucester and Guadalcanal were.

THE LANDING

At the first grey light on D-Day, 15 September 1944, all hands were topside to watch the fire support ships and planes put on the show that every-one present knew was but a prelude to the main act, their act. They were lined up at the starboard rails of the LST'S and could see a low blue hummock on the horizon over the starboard bow, which meant that the ships were making their final approach from the south-west.

This was the fourth day of shelling from surface vessels and the tenth day of aerial bombing. The Navy was really saturating the island.

There was much conjecture among the troops as to the effectiveness of the preliminary bombing and shelling.

At 0832 the first wave hit the beach. (Map C). This wave was the armored amphibious tanks or LVT(A)'S. They had successfully negotiated the reef but were having a hard time on the beach because of an abrupt coral ridge just off the beach. (33)

(33) A-9, p. 40.

The Japanese had ~~lain~~ dormant under the shelling and bombing, but reacted swiftly when the landing waves started onto the beach. Just prior to the first wave's hitting the beach, the LCI'S (Landing Craft, Infantry) mounting rocket launchers had put in close inshore and launched about 8,000 rockets onto the beaches and just inland. As soon as this firing had been completed and the troops approached the beach, the Jap fire began. Artillery and mortar shells started landing all along the outer edge of the reef and then seemed to walk inland. (34)

When the first waves of troops landed, they ran into immediate difficulty; scattered Jap resistance was met on the beach itself. (35) On the extreme left flank of the division beach a heavy fire fight ensued. ~~The~~ critical terrain feature's being contested was a rugged coral point from which the Japs began enfilading the entire north half of the division beach. The company which landed there captured the knoll in short order taking severe casualties in so doing, and were presently isolated from the division.

The issue was in doubt for at least twenty-four hours; however, contact was regained with the rest of the division on D plus 1, after the company had held out against numerous counter attacks the night of D-Day. (36)

In the center of the beach, the 5th Marines got ashore against light beach resistance, pushed inland, and immediately ran into stiffer resistance. ^{Troop on the} The left flank of the 5th Marines crossed a small coral ridge on the beach, attacked another to their front, and were caught between fires from front and rear. The flame-thrower was utilized to very

(34) Personal Knowledge; (35) A-1, p. 34; (36) A-10, entire book.

good effect in this locality. The 7th Marines on the right flank had about the same experience as the 5th Marines in landing, but successive waves were taken under fire from anti-boat guns on the right flank of the division beach and they had a difficult time eliminating this strong point. The 7th Marines had landed in a column of two battalions, their remaining battalions being still afloat as division reserves. The 1st and 5th Marines had landed two battalions abreast as had been planned. (37)

The anti-boat guns already mentioned which were enfilading the entire beach from the north and south were very cleverly emplaced to accomplish their purpose. They were defiladed to the sea, dug into coral caves, and had from six to eight feet of coral piled on top of the emplacements. They had been absolutely unharmed by the ship's bombardment and aerial bombing. Their effectiveness is apparent from the report of an aerial observer on D-Day who reported thirty-eight amphibious tractors hit and burning on the reef. (38). These guns had certainly contributed to that score. (39)

The medium tanks landed in the fourth wave. Six LCT'S landed them on the edge of the reef almost simultaneously. There were five tanks loaded on each LCT with an LVT loaded ~~also~~ nearest the bow. As the LCT beached the LVT disembarked and led the line of five tanks across the reef. Each LVT had a tank NCO aboard with a radio operator. These NCO's guided the tank columns across the reef verbally. The tanks were buttoned up. At least half the tanks were hit in the ten minutes it took for them to cross the reef. However, the artillery and mortar shells did no damage, probably because

(37) Personal Knowledge; (38) A-8, p. 292; (39) Personal Knowledge.

the lower hulls and suspension systems were under water. (40)

Immediately inland the tanks ran into minefields which blew the tracks off five tanks. The remainder negotiated the minefield safely. The tankers then dismounted, removed the waterproofing, located the command posts of their respective landing teams, and were committed. (41)

The enemy reacted violently to the landing. The beaches, reef and area inland were subjected to constant artillery, mortar and small arms fire throughout the day. There were numerous small local counter-attacks at the flanks of the beach.

The Japanese commander initiated three coordinated attempts to dislodge the landing forces. At 1645 the enemy was readily repulsed in an attack on the center of the beach-head, which at that point was at the edge of the airfield. At 1740 he directed a thrust at our left, where the beach-head was most shallow, and was driven off in a heavy fire fight. Then at 1745, he threw in his main threat. Thirteen Jap tanks supported by infantry drove into the beachhead line just at the regimental boundary between the 5th and 1st Marines. There were about a platoon and a half of our tanks in this area. The infantry took care of the Japanese infantry and a tank battle roared just above their heads. The thirteen enemy tanks were quickly disposed of by our Sherman tanks, with an able assist from men with bazookas. We had one tank disabled and some casualties among our infantry. We also suffered some casualties from a Navy plane which fired rockets in a wild attempt to hit the enemy tanks, which at the time had penetrated our front lines, which were plainly marked with panels. (42)

(40) A-1, p. 34 & 188; (41) A-1, p. 189; (42) A-1, p. 34; A-9, p. 46; Personal Knowledge.

At 1227, the division reconnaissance company had been ordered ashore and joined the 7th Marines. (43)

At 1600, the division reserve, ~~and~~ ^{2nd} battalion, 7th Marines were ordered in, and had a difficult time getting over the beach and reef. (44)

At 1800, the division had established a beachhead ^{not shore} 3,000 yards long which averaged 500 yards in depth. Little progress had been made in the north, the center was on the southwestern edge of the airfield, but on the south, the penetration was up to 1,500 yards. We had one and a half battalions of pack Howitzers (75MM) ashore, and also one and a third battalions of 105MM Howitzers.

Then division had paid a stiff price to get ashore as the division had a total of 1,298 casualties on D-Day. (45)

On the first night ashore, the Marines were bothered by a constant harassing fire from artillery and mortars, and numerous small enemy infiltrations, parties who attacked the Marines in their hasty entrenchments. There was a fairly well coordinated Japanese attack on the isolated company at the north end of the beachhead, but it was not the usual wild "banzai" attack which had come to be regarded as normal for the Japanese. Some of these enemy referred to as infiltrators were not actually that, but, rather, these men ^{who} had come out of the caves and dug-outs which had not been completely cleared out along the beach. (46)

THE CAPTURE OF THE ISLAND

The next morning at daybreak the Japs started across the airfield in an attempted attack, which actually never materialized, as they were driven to cover practically as (43) (44) A-1, p. 34; (45) A-1, p. 34; (46) A-1, p. 35 and Personal Knowledge.

soon as they showed themselves in the open.

With artillery preparation, a general attack was executed at about 0800. The 1st Marines made very little headway advancing only several hundred yards all day. The 5th Marines, with a coordinated tank-infantry attack, advanced straight across the airfield under a hail of fire of all types and gained the northern edge against heavy opposition. The 7th Marines wheeled to the south and advanced slowly and steadily against the strongly entrenched Japs in that area. (47)

The Japs defensive plans had envisaged the withdrawal of their troops to the hills in the event of a successful American landing. The Marines severance of the island on D plus 1 had cut off one or more battalions on the southern end of the island, and it was these enemy who were now resisting the 7th Marines. (48)

On D plus 2, the whole division resumed the attack. By 1600, the 7th Marines had captured the southern promontory of the island. (Map C) The 5th Marines advance to the north-east was somewhat slowed when it ran into mangrove swamp. The 1st Marines now realized that in attacking the coral hills it had hit the hard core of Japanese resistance. Here the enemy was at his best, superbly dug in with his weapons zeroed in on every square inch of the area to his front. The 1st Marines were forced to earn the hard way, every inch of their advance; and it was being measured out in inches, literally. (49)

On 18 September, D plus 3, the 7th Marines completed the capture of the southern portion of the island. The

(47) A-1, p. 36; A-9, p. 46-47; (48) A-9, p. 47, and Personal knowledge; (49) A-1, p. 36 and Personal Knowledge.

1st division released the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, the division reserve, to the 1st Marines. (50)

The 8th Battalion, Corps Artillery came ashore and registered in on Agaur in support of the 81st Army Division. (51)

On 19 September CT-5 (the infantry regiments will henceforth be referred to as combat teams) overran the Ngardelok Area and reached the east coast. CT-5 secured the eastern beaches the following day and continued to the north, taking the little island north-east of Peleliu by wading out to it. (Map C) On the 20th, CT-7 moved up on line facing to the north. They were now in position on the right flank of CT-1. The construction battalions began work on the airfield, which had not incurred much damage.

Air Intelligence announced on the 20th that there were 127 enemy aircraft on the field, most of which had been demolished in the attack.

Water was still scarce. The engineers were operating water points at some Jap wells, utilizing purification units. They were also drilling more wells, as, contrary to intelligence reports, fresh water could be had from wells. However, there was no fresh surface water on the island.

The fighting was now a slugging match with the Japs holed up in their natural fortresses. Continued attacks were failing to gain any appreciable advantage. Division issued an order calling for CT-321 to replace CT-1 in the attack. CT-321 (the 321st Infantry Regiment of the 81st Infantry Division had been ordered ashore by III Corps) was to press the attack along the low ground to the west of the range of coral hills. (Map C) CT-1 was ordered to garrison the east coast, and upon their relief by CT-1, CT-5 was to become the div-
(50) (51), A-1, p. 36.

ision reserve. This relief was to be completed by 1800, 23 September. (52)

The order was issued on 23 September and began to take immediate effect.

Instigated by favorable patrols and air reconnaissance, CT-321 was ordered to send a battalion up the shore road to the west at 1600. This they did, and the battalion advanced appreciably against very little opposition and dug in for the night. They were unable to push to their right up into the hills, however. (53)

25 September brought the first signs of the enemy's resistance cracking. The 321st turned to the east and attacked up the ridge in an attempt to cut the enemy off in his strongly defended lair. CT-321 reached the crest of the ridge at 1030. (54)

Division was quick to take advantage of this, their first break of the operation. At 0945, they ordered CT-1 to take over CT-5's position^S which were then primarily in the small islands northeast of Peleliu. CT-5 was to be transported by truck to the west coast, disembarked, execute a passage of lines through CT-321 and attack north without delay. The objective for that day was the radio station, (Map C) on northeastern Peleliu, almost directly under the northern hill mass. CT-5 passed through CT-321 at about 1400 to 1500, advanced rapidly to the north, in column, with the 1st Battalion as advance guard, reinforced by a platoon of tanks. They met sporadic resistance all the way, but darkness found them digging in, with the objective taken. (55)

That night, the 1st Battalion, CT-5 was subjected to heavy fire and local counter-attacks. It is believed that the Japanese sighted-in several field pieces before dark, as they (52) (53) (54) A-1, p. 40, 41; (55) Personal Knowledge.

were unbelievably accurate in their night firing. These enemy field pieces were captured the next day in vicious fighting as CT-5 continued the attack. (56)

On 26 September, CT-5 attacked and captured two key hills in the northern hill mass. At the same time CT-321 made gains on the high ground on the hill mass north of the field, and CT-7 pushed a battalion forward and contacted CT-321's right flank. (57)

That day, the 26th, plans were being made in Division Headquarters for an attack on Ngesebus (Map C) on the following day, but subsequent events did not warrant it. That night the underwater demolition teams were active in reconnoitering and clearing the reef connecting Peleliu and Ngesebus. They operated from APD'S (58).

By late afternoon of 27 September, CT-5 had fought its way around the northern end of Peleliu and immediately began to force its way down the east coast of the western peninsula. (Map C) At the same time other elements of CT-5 were rapidly gaining control of the hill mass in this area.

There were now definite indications of a decline in the enemy's combat efficiency. There was a decrease in his night activity. By the end of the day (27 September) most of Peleliu was in American hands. CT-321 and CT-7 had almost contained the enemy in the Umurbrugal Mountain pocket, and CT-5 was wiping out the last vestige of Japs within the northern hill mass.

NGESEBUS. (MAP C)

At 0903, the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines/launched a shore-

(56) Personal Knowledge; (57) A-1, p. 42; (58) A-1, p. 42 and Personal Knowledge.

to-shore assault on Ngesebus, the tiny island off the north-western coast of Peleliu.

A heavy concentration of fire from ships, land-based artillery and air preceded the landing. The Corsairs of VMF-114 played an impressive part with their bombing runs and strafing sweeps at very low altitude. The 3rd Battalion was transported to Ngesebus in LVT'S. The first wave was again composed of LVT(A)'S. Sixteen medium tanks attempted to wade from Peleliu to Ngesebus on the shallow connecting reef; of the sixteen, thirteen made it across, and their early support of the infantry proved to be invaluable. By mid-afternoon the entire island of Ngesebus was secured with the exception of a small pocket on the north-west tip, and the adjoining strip of land known as Kongaru (Map C) was also under control. The remaining pocket was cleared out on the following day. (59)

THE POCKET

On the same day as the Ngesebus assault the other two battalions of CT-5 made advances which just about completed the activity on the northern part of Peleliu. We now turn our attention back to the fierce battle of attrition being fought in the hills just north of the airfield.

On 28 September the Japanese in this area were contained in a pocket held by CT-321 on the north and west and by CT-7 on the south and east. The Japanese did not seem to be fazed by the turn of events. Neither combat team was making much headway.

On the night of the 28th, the Japanese initiated desperate raids on CT-7. The assaults closed to bayonet range
(59) A-1, P. 43; Personal Knowledge.

with the 7th repulsing them. Still there had been no attacks on the old frenzied "banzai" pattern on the part of the Japs. (60)

Enemy dead on Peleliu on 28 September was estimated at 8,450 and we had 126 prisoners of war, principally Koreans. Our losses on Peleliu at this time were 791 killed in action, 3,777 wounded in action, and 369 missing in action, or a total of 4,937. The 321st CT had lost 33 killed, 182 wounded, and 7 missing, or 222 altogether.

Plans for withdrawing the first echelon of the First Division were outlined in Movement Order 3-44. The organizations concerned made ready to load on 29 September. (61)

On 27 September, organized enemy resistance came to a halt except in the grimly defended pocket north of the airfield.

Also on 29 September, CT-321 relieved the 3rd Battalion, CT-5 on Ngesebus.

CT-5, had cleared out the entire north end of the island with the exceptions of one large cave. CT-7 relieved the army unit on its left.

On this same date the LVT(A)'S that were patrolling the reef north of Peleliu killed about 150 Japs in small boats who were apparently trying to leave the island. This group included many officers. (62)

As September ended the pocket in the Umurbrugai sector had decreased to a small area only 900 yards in length by 400 yards in width. The airfield was operative, and base development was proceeding.

The last day of September also saw the Marine fighters (planes)

(61) A-1, p. 44; (60) A-1, p. 43, 44; (62) A-1, p. 45.

join in on an attempt to eliminate the costly island of Jap resistance. They dropped twenty 1,000 lb. bombs accurately on the enemy positions. These planes bombed within 1,000 yards of their own runway. They approached the target with their wheels and flaps down released their bombs, circled and landed. The bombing was very accurate, but seemed to achieve no particularly advantageous results. The Japanese could undoubtedly see them taking off, and naturally took advantage of their remarkably bombproof positions. (63)

Early October saw constant attacks by the American forces with very small gains. Every day was taking its toll from our battle-wearied troops. The rifle companies had been hit very hard by casualties. The heat and constant grind had added to the lessening of their combat efficiency.

Early October also ushered in high winds and mounting seas, which hampered and finally halted loading activities. Air supply had to be resorted to as the winds reached near-typhoon velocities. (64)

On 2 October, CT-1 had sailed for Pavuvu.

Constant pressure was being applied to the Japanese. CT-7 reinforced by the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines made good gains on 3 October, knocking out many caves and pillboxes. (65)

Captured Jap orders dated as late as 1 October indicated that they were still well ordered and disciplined. (66)

On 5 October, CT-5 relieved CT-7 on the perimeter, of the pocket, and immediately captured an important hill that held up the advance for days. (67)

(63) A-8, p. 309; (64) A-8, p. 310; (65) A-1, p. 49; (66) A-1, p. 49; (67) A-1, p. 49.

Records are incomplete here as to who now had responsibility for containing the Japanese on the Western slopes of the pocket. A heterogeneous force of artillerymen, pioneers, engineers, and other service troops had taken over this assignment about the 29th of September. The 7th Marines had completed this perimeter and the 5th Marines had relieved them, as stated above. CT-321 had been assigned garrison duties on Ngesebus, northern Peleliu and a few smaller islands to the north. (68)

From 5 October-14 October, CT-5 made constant attacks on the Japanese, slowly making short advances utilizing the support of tanks, flame-throwers, mounted on LVT'S, and artillery firing direct fire on the caves from the northern edge of the airfield. On one occasion during this period, the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marines drove into the main pocket, capturing all of the low ground and neutralizing dozens of caves. They were unable to hold these positions with the enemy so strongly entrenched on the high ground, and withdrew at dark. (69)

On 14 October the Marines of Marine Air Group 11 flew a strike on the hill country still in enemy hands, dropping Napalm bombs on them. This was quite a ticklish mission, as the Japanese were compressed into a very small area and the bombs were actually only belly-tanks filled with a Napalm mixture. The Japs offered a relatively small target and there was danger of hitting our own troops. However, the mission was flown successfully.

Division issued an order late on 13 October ordering CT-321 to relieve CT-5. The period 14 to 18 October was (68) A-6, p. 31; Personal Knowledge; (69) A-1, p. 48,50; Personal Knowledge.

spent in effecting this relief. (70)

The III Phib Corps issued an order on 20 October, directing the Commanding General, 81st Infantry Division to take command of the combat forces in the Southern Palaus, including CT-5, which was to remain for garrison duty until relieved by army forces. (71)

CT-7 was alerted by movement order #4-44 to prepare to embark for Pavuvu, Russell Islands. The C. G. 1st Marine Division, his staff, and a part of division headquarters departed Peleliu at 2300, 20 October, 1944. (72)

On the final count of casualties it can be perceived that the 1st Division suffered a great many losses in the assault on, and capture of this small island: 1,124 dead, 5,024 wounded, 117 missing, for a total of 6,265. The Japs had had 10,695 men killed and 301 captured. (73)

The remaining regiment and its supporting units, together comprising CT-5 remained in garrison duty until 26 October under Brig. Gen. O. P. Smith, the assistant Division Commander. At that time they were relieved of garrison duty, began loading aboard ships, and sailed for Pavuvu on 30 October, thus completing the 1st Marine Division's operation at Peleliu. (74)

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In analyzing the operation let's consider first the nature of the terrain of the objective, Peleliu Island. This amphibious target ^{with} itself restricted the tactics of the invader.

The reef surrounding the island presented an obstacle to be overcome in the initial landing of troops and the heavy weapons so necessary to establish a firm beach-head ashore.

Next, the width of beaches, the mangrove swamps, and the hill mass limited the selection of beaches. The east coast was made objectionable by the heavy mangrove and low swampy sectors. The south presented no beaches extensive enough for a division's landing. The north-west coast was overlooked by the rugged escarpment several hundred yards inland. The north was inaccessible except to boats winding through island passages which could be enfiladed from both sides. Thus, by a process of isolation, the south-west coast's beaches seemed to be a solution to the problem.

The Japanese, in this defense, evolved a new application of defensive tactics dissimilar from their predecessors in the Marianas and elsewhere. Perhaps this is due to the fact that they had access to the lessons learned in the Marianas. At any rate that they had learned was ably demonstrated in their conduct of the defense.

The Japanese commander planned thoroughly and well. He had his troops construct fortifications strong enough to withstand the pre-invasion bombardment. His concept was to lay dormant during this phase, defend the beaches lightly

insofar as infantry strength was concerned, but strongly with well observed and pre-registered fire, and to counter-attack the first evening, prior to the establishment of a firm beach-head by the invaders. He devised plans to withdraw troops, during the first day, from the beaches not engaged and counter-attack with his maximum strength, using his tanks with infantry support.

Ultimately, if his previous efforts had failed to dislodge the Americans, the Jap commander's plan called for a last-ditch stand in the Umurbrogal Mountains area so admirably suited to this purpose. In this way, he would be able to prevent operation of the airfield base development, and exact the extreme price possible in American lives.

The Japanese commander conceived of seven different plans for counter-attacks to fit all situations he deemed imaginable for the first day of the landing.

Why did the defense fail? The Jap had failed to reckon with the ingenuity and material strength of the Americans in getting their tanks ashore so early in the landing attempt. In addition, when he committed his tanks the first afternoon, they made the fatal error, after having penetrated our lines, of engaging our superior tanks in a tank battle; instead of continuing to the vital beach area and artillery positions, which were only a few hundred yards away from them.

Another error on the part of the Jap Commander was his failure to withdraw his forces from the south in time to prevent their being cut off there. As it was, this force of more than a battalion did not pose nearly the problem for the Marines, that they would have, had they augmented the

force in the hills.

The attack can naturally be divided into three phases: the landing and establishment of the beach-head, the capture of the low ground and the containing and gradual eliminating of the Jap force in the central hill mass.

The first of the phases was achieved expeditiously by the aggressive application of amphibious techniques learned by this and other divisions in the Pacific in so many prior amphibious operations.

The second phase of capturing the low ground was achieved in a similar workmanlike manner except that the exploiting of the weakness of the low ground on the north-western peninsula would have been quicker had the reconnaissance of that area been more complete and aggressive. Also more tanks would have been invaluable, and we were guilty of underestimating the enemy in our failure to bring all of the medium tanks with us from the staging area.

The containing of the enemy was a masterly stroke, but he stood us off for too long and exacted too high a toll in American lives. This drawn out feature of the operation showed the need for some new-type of powerful weapon for the annihilation of a fanatical enemy so heavily fortified. Our weapons that are adequate to blast such defenses could not be brought to bear. It was not tank country, artillery could not take the targets under fire, and bombing from aircraft was not the answer. Perhaps in the future, large caliber recoilless weapons, hand-carried, can do the job.

Furthermore, it must be recognized by commanders, that high casualty rates have an adverse effect on fighting effi-

efficiency of lower infantry units out of all proportion to their percentage of total number. It has been estimated on the results of World War II that 90% of the casualties in a division are incurred forward of the battalion command post. A very high proportion of these casualties occur among the Junior Officers and non-commissioned officers. Hence, when a division has had over 5,000 casualties the fighting efficiency of the nine infantry battalions has been seriously impaired. It is therefore believed that in the latter phase of this operation, the continued attacking with the worn-out battalions of the 1st Division was less effective than their relief by the relatively fresh troops of the 81st U. S. Infantry Division would have been.

LESSONS LEARNED

There were not too many "lessons learned" during this operation, rather a number of old lessons were brought more forcibly to mind.

Among these were:

(1) The Japanese switch^h in concept of defense from a strong defense of the beaches to one more in depth was a consideration for future planners of amphibious operations. The same can be said for his failure to waste his manpower in headlong, reckless, and uncoordinated "banzai" attacks.

(2) Any remaining vestige of a belief in the efficiency of naval gunfire and aerial bombing as weapons that could ^{can} crush resistance was utterly destroyed.

(3) That seemingly unsurmountable physical problems, such as the early landing of tanks under the exis-

tent circumstances, can be solved with the application of industry, ingenuity, and aggressiveness.

(4) "Never underestimate the enemy". This principle, though seemingly trite, was definitely reemphasized, as the Jap conducted a fierce, masterful defense.

(5) That the principle of "diminishing returns" has application to the continued utilization of infantry units decimated by casualties.