

## **Chapter X**

### ***Trials in Combat...Peril's and Pitfalls of Peleliu***

48 HOURS OF HELL: IN THE TANK TRAP...AT THE POINT..... 80% Casualties.....2nd platoon, Company K, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division, PELELIU, 1944, WORLD WAR II

#### **Introduction:**

Author Burke Davis stated in his book "**Marine**" that the total casualties of the 1st Regiment in the battle for Peleliu was the "highest regimental losses in the history of the corps." He noted this included all battles before and after Peleliu. In the recent publication "**The Story of Ray Davis,**" General Davis designates the Invasion of Peleliu as the toughest test of the Corps battles he encountered. Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Guam, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Siapan, MacArthur's landing on the Philippines and the WWII battles fought in Europe, and other military confrontations fought before and after WWII, have mostly all been highly publicized in the news media and movies. In comparison, while several good books have been written, very little has been publicly said about Peleliu. Many informed experts today state that we should not have invaded Peleliu; that it was not necessary and could have been by-passed. Also, because of the untold number of casualties many may have chosen not to publicly illuminate what actually occurred. The ferocity and intensity of other battles and invasions may have equaled, but surely, could not exceed Peleliu. Harry Gailey said in his book "**Peleliu**" that in terms of "sheer heroism, every man who fought at Peleliu deserves the highest awards his country could bestow."

Background:

My father, a former college President and U.S. Congressman encouraged me to become a fighter pilot; the Air Force said I was too tall at 6'4 1/2" so I cast my lot with the U.S. Marine Corps. On the long troop train trip from Georgia via New Orleans to San Diego, California, much of my time was in reflecting on past years. As a boy scout camping and hiking; graduating from Bacon County High School in Alma, Georgia;

working in Brunswick as a roofer on War Apartments and as an outside machinist building Victory Ships for several months, before joining the corps. Little did I realize that my time in the corps from 10-20-43 to 11-29-45 would keep me from home until time spent in 5 hospitals (Okinawa, Guam, Hawaii, San Diego and Charleston). My pay (\$1.00 to \$2.00 per day) had accumulated, and at discharge, I knew I had been lucky and thought I was wealthy being paid \$630.49. This and the G.I Bill put me through Law School.

After boot camp in Platoon 1000, time at Camp Pendleton, we became a part of the 48th Replacement Battalion around the first part of April, 1944 and sailed on S.S. Azalea City, under the Command of Lt. Col. Mizell, heading for the south pacific. We became Shellbacks when we crossed the equator. This ancient order and solemn mysteries of the deep initiation included, among other things, chewing up a big bite of raw fish. About the middle of April we landed in Noumea, New Caledonia to the strains of "Anchors Away" played by the Navy Band. At Camp St. Louis we walked off our sea-legs with a 30 mile hike. This camp had been one of the original Raider Camps. Here we received some advanced training. I spent 3 weeks attending a Japanese Weapons School while also doing guard duty at the Hotel Du Pacific. Sometime in May we headed, via Guadalcanal, to the island of Pavuvu and I was assigned to K-3-1 of the 1st Marine Division.

The first person I met and talked with in front of my tent was combat veteran Bill Riley. He wanted to ask questions about what was going on in the states and I was urging him to tell me about the "Green Hell of Guadalcanal." There were 8 of us in the small tent. Joe Daily, our squad leader, Joe Daranio, Doug Foley, Homer Cushman, C.D. Lamb, W.R. Byron, one other, maybe Bailey, and me. Bill Thompson was our group leader, Odell Evans was scout (although our scout may have been Byron or Cushman). I carried the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle), and Joe Gatto was my assistant. Thompson said I was so tall he would put me out in front during combat as a type of observation post or watchtower. If I didn't get hit everybody would be safe. Foley called me Deen the Bean or Stringbean. We caught rain water in our helmets to take a bath. After a summer of intensive training we were ready to fight. Daily's squad always got extra

morning exercise and calisthenics, getting us combat ready, while others jeered and cheered us on.

On August 24 we boarded LST 227 and were escorted by a convoy of 4 battleships, U.S.S. Penn, U.S.S. New Mexico, U.S.S. Idaho, U.S.S. Utah, and many cruisers, to our destination of Peleliu. My bed for the next three weeks was in a Hammock swinging from supports tied to trucks and machinery stored on the top deck of the LST. Playing card games, cleaning weapons, exercising and eating was our main activity. We spent a lot of time in the lineup for showers, chow line and sick-call lines. When the weather was bad, rain and winds came, the ship tossed about we would hang on and get wet. After an early steak and eggs breakfast on September 15, 1944, we were ready to board into the LVT's, (Landing Vehicle Tracked), or tractors. We were in the 2nd Platoon of K-3-1. As one of the two assault platoons we had a demolition team, one bazooka team, and two flame thrower teams assigned to our 2nd Platoon. We all had experience in the climbing over the side of the ship with heavy weapons, equipment and packs into the rope netting moving down into the, bouncing in the choppy waves, LVT landing crafts. It was about 7:30 a.m. and we were to hit the beach at 8:30 a.m.

Peleliu...1st day...Tank Trap Area:

For about an hour the many boats circled and lined up for the final move forward. As we moved in we saw some of our planes shot down. A tractor or boat on each side of us blew up and the bodies of marines were thrown about. Salvo of rockets were being endlessly and automatically unleashed. As our tractor crawled over the coral reefs and toward the shore shells were dropping like rain; machine gun fire was rattling all around us; mortar fire and phosphorous smell and smoke and stench of burning fumes was present. The remnants of half burned coconut trees caught our attention. As we exited our tractor we were in a cross-fire from the Japanese on the hill and ridge in our front and the enemy at the point to our north enfilading all of K Company as we landed. Advancing up toward the ridge Cpl. Warren Lloyd was shot through the head; our Plt. Leader 2nd Lt. Wayland Woodyard was killed. The latter had a strong premonition that he would die at Peleliu. Shortly thereafter Plt. Sgt. Emil Maisek was wounded and out of action. Bailey came

up to the tank trap area and fell dead in the arms of Melvin Hauge. The latter and Odell Evans were advancing in front of the trap when Bill Thompson told them to come back to try to set up a defense. The tank trap was about seventy five yards inland from the ocean beach; was about 10ft. high and 15ft. wide and possibly 150 yards in length, running somewhat parallel to the landing beach. My assistant BARman Joseph Gatto was at the top of the trap firing at the ridge when a bullet pierced him in the center of his forehead right between his eyes. He slid and fell right besides Sgt. John Testa who was pinned down by enemy fire. Six days later Testa and Sgt. Bandy were together at night when the former was wounded in a heavy mortar barrage. Bandy took over as Plt. Sgt., in the trap.

Those in and around the trap were firing at what they could see out toward the ridge. The 2nd platoon had no contact with other units on either flank. Most survivors were in the trap now or in ditches in front of the trap pinned down by a devastating cross fire from coral ridges, concrete pillboxes, caves and formidable fighting holes. My tent buddy Joe Dariano while shooting at a Jap a few yards in front of him was shot in the head and shoulder and looked bloody. Doug Foley and our corpsman Bill Jenkins went to his rescue and gave him aid. Jim St. Charles was shot through the heart and died although Jenkins tried to save him. A flame thrower named Jones was killed trying to go up and over the trap. He slid back down. Bill Cobb a machine gunner was shot through the thigh. Sgt. Le Beau was wounded. Cpl. Harlan Murray was hit in the shoulder. Bill Riley was among the wounded. Jenkins was busy trying to lend a hand to all. One of my buddies told me later that he and another marine were wounded, and both had to play dead, in order to survive, when a host of Japs came running through their area in the left section of the trap.

Many of our group were killed before they got to the trap, on each side of it, and in, and out in front of the trap. More than 150 Japs had infiltrated into the large gap and area between our 2nd Platoon at the Trap, and, northward where the 3rd and 1st platoons were fighting to secure the Point. The second platoon was virtually and almost completely surrounded by the Japs. It was about mid afternoon. It was extremely hot, at least over 100 degrees. Water and ammunition was scarce. We didn't

know what was going on at the Point. The 3rd platoon was to move toward the point. The 2nd platoon was to be on their right flank, head toward the ridge and swing left toward the north as the first days objective. The 1st platoon was in reserve but since we had no help they must have been committed to help at the point. We had suffered severe casualties and had less than a squad left. Hugh Wigginton was trying to make contact by telephone for help. We were trapped without cover, almost surrounded and virtually annihilated. With the Japs concentrating on the 2nd platoon maybe, somehow, this may have made the taking of the point a little easier. The 1st day was confusion and chaos, death and devastation and blood and guts in and around the tank trap area. To the best of my knowledge those of our platoon not yet killed or wounded were: Bandy, Daily, Testa, Evans, Hauge, Thompson, Jenkins, Darling, Cushman, Wigginton, Legate, Deen, and maybe, Dolan, Hooker and Lamb. Of this remaining number only about 9 of us, 20% of the original total number of the 2nd platoon, made it through the entire Peleliu Campaign, without physical injury.

My group leader Thompson was trying to set up a line of some type of defense as it appeared that we might spend the night trying to hold on. He placed me in a small ditch or trench perpendicular to the trap and told me to hold that position. Firing at the enemy was made difficult because they were well entrenched on the Coral Ridge looking down on us. Murray and Lamb came up and jumped into the trench for different periods of time. Rifle and machine gun fire hitting inches above our heads was continuous. Late in the afternoon tanks had pulled up to a point behind the trap to drop water and ammunition. When the tanks returned back toward the rear some of our wounded left the trap running along side and with the tanks. Jenkins went up over the trap and into the ditch where two or three of us were and told us to return to the trap.

I give credit to him saving my life for he could have been killed under the ceaseless machine gun fire we were receiving. I think Jenkins and Evans carried wounded W.R. Byron back to the trap, but am not certain. Am not sure what happened to Byron and some others. Murray and Jenkins and I crawled back through the ditch and made a desperate leap back into the trap and it was a miracle we were not hit. Born in the

South I was never so glad to see Sherman Tanks whose machine gun fire covered our departure around dark from the trap. The wounded left first. I think I was one of the last three to leave. Some help in reinforcements of another company had come up. A marine behind a coconut tree said to me "I see you marine" and we ran back almost to the waters edge. Four of us jumped into a large shellhole, dug it a little deeper, and stayed there under heavy fire, all night. I think Evans, Hauge and Cushman were in the hole with me but I may be in error. I left my pack with all my possessions, (my wallet, family photos, blanket, poncho, socks, underwear, and my gas mask) in this hole the next morning. All we took was our BAR, Ammo, Bayonet, Knife, and Canteens of Water. An amphibious tractor or Higgins Boat took less than a dozen of us, the remnants of the 2nd platoon, which was about a squad, several hundred yards out in the water, or up the beach, north to join Cap. Hunt and those left of the other two platoons at the Point. Coral Comes High, written by Capt. Hunt, covers the assault and attack and taking of the Point and other activity of K-3-1 on Peleliu.

### **Peleliu...2nd day...at the Point:**

We had been under fire for 24 hours; all day at the tank trap and all night heavy sniper fire while dug in at the beach. Sometime the morning of the second day the enemy fire subsided so that we could make our trip to the Point. We got some chow and water and were placed and consolidated in the defense lines of the Point. Sometime in the afternoon Daily's squad and others of the 2nd platoon, and Sgt Hahn may have been with us, were sent out in front of the lines on a patrol. We were to check out several of the caves to see if the Japs were still present. After going out about 150 yards we came to a large coral cave. Thompson told me to begin to spray shots throughout the cave with my BAR. I pulled the trigger and nothing happened. It may have gotten sand or dirt in it during the first night. After several unsuccessful attempts to fire the weapon Thompson told me to run back and show it to Cap. Hunt and see if he could get it to functioning. While Hunt and I were working on the BAR, others had begun to fire into the caves. Hunt told me that the BAR I had was the same one that they had trouble with at Guadalcanal. I wound up getting an M-1 Rifle. Before I

could get back a fierce grenade, rifle and Tommygun fight ensued confronting about 40 of the enemy. Daily had been hit, Cushman killed, and at least 4 others wounded; and all remaining of the patrol were running back to the defense line of the point. Hauge and another were carrying a wounded marine back. It was a costly patrol but all now knew the caves were still full of Japs for the coming night.

Evans and I had piled up rocks for a type of protective foxhole as dark approached. Lt. Hanson and his mortar group was set up behind the point almost on the waters edge. They had about 1000 rounds of ammo ready for their 60mm mortars. Sgt. Joe Lacey was the FO of the mortar section for K Company. The first part of the evening was quiet. When the Japs made their move about 10:00 p.m., "all hell broke loose". They were throwing heavy grenade and mortar fire at our lines and began making a concentrated frontal assault at the center of our lines. They tried to penetrate our left flank along the water with close-in hand to hand fighting. The front erupted with machine gun fire, BAR's, hand grenades, some bayonet attacks and with over 950 rounds of mortar fire from our side. Seemingly flares were in the air almost continuously all night so that we could see as well as hear the ceaseless efforts to wrest this valuable strategic Point from K Company. Without the mortar group's contribution I'm not sure our line could have held. Things got hectic and a marine crawled to where Evans and I were and asked Evans to go with him to help out with one of the machine guns.

The next day...the third day, estimates of 400 to 600 hundred dead Japanese bodies was stacked up, and was the big price they had paid. We also lost good marines in mortar, rifle and bayonet hand to hand combat confrontation. A marine named Fred Fox who had been a one man listening post near the water in front of the line had been shot, bayoneted and left for dead in the ocean by the Japs, was rescued and brought back for medical aid. The few of us left in the 2nd platoon breathed easier; we had endured and survived 48 hours of nightmares and bad dreams we would never forget. We had dodged bullets, bayonets, shrapnel with little food and water and no sleep. (The writer later in 1945 was with K-3-1 at Okinawa where we had to take villages and hill after hill; the company had substantial casualties, and had gotten about 120 replacements during the 3

weeks I was on the front line in Southern Okinawa before sustaining 3 shrapnel wounds). Although Okinawa was a nightmare of "Hell", I often wonder can it compare with the first several days of Peleliu?

Peleliu...the next dozen days:

After 48 hours, or, maybe 72 hours, L Company came up to join us. Thereafter, for about 10 days we walked through rocks and swamps finally setting up to guard a lane or roadway. We could see bloody nose ridge in the distance. We got a little rest. Later we were taken maybe by boat to a rest area in another part of the island. Thereafter we returned by ship to Pavuvu to receive replacements and get ready for the invasion of Okinawa on April 1, 1945. Someone has advised that out of 45 in the 2nd platoon 20 had been killed, 15 wounded, and about 10 left on the Peleliu Invasion. Another has said there was only 9 of us not killed or wounded. (80% casualties in the 2nd platoon in the first 48 hours). Of the 9 left there are 5 still living today. Counting both the non-wounded and the wounded, living today, we are less than a dozen.

All that I fought with could be called hero's; but, the real hero's did not come back as they paid the full measure..."not for fame or reward...not for place or rank...not lured by ambition or goaded by necessity...but in simple obedience to duty as they understood it...they suffered all, sacrificed all, dared all and died." No one should forget this. Those of us of K-3-1 still living will never forget Peleliu, and, those who perished, and, those who paid the ultimate price!