The South Pacific battle for the Palau Islands during WWII

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Goal is to introduce you to why Japan and the U.S. got into their conflict, and describe what it was like to fight on a small rock in the middle of South Pacific.
Where is Japan?
**Issues facing Japan in early 1900s**

- Limited natural resources
- Other countries were colonizing other places, why can’t we?
- Already into China – why not keep going?
- September 18, 1931 - Mukden, China
3 names you **must** understand

1. Joseph Stalin
2. Mao Zedong
3. Chiang Kai-shek

Chiang Kai-shek was trying to save China, and Stalin was worried that China would fall completely.
Europe mid to late 1930’s
• **May 1, 1941** – Stalin invites Germany to annual parade in Red Square and both sign non-aggression pact

• **June 22, 1941** – Germany attacks Russia with no warning

• **November 1, 1941** – Germany bombs Moscow
No, really - where is Japan?
Japan makes bold moves outside their geographic area

- December 7, 1941 – Hawaii is bombed

- Soon after that (literally days), Japan invaded China, Philippines, Burma, British Borneo, Hong Kong, Dutch Borneo, Solomon Islands, Java, Singapore, Sumatra, Bali, Midway, Aleutian Islands, and on and on and on and on.
To give you a scope of Japan’s expansion...

• The U.S. is about 2,600 miles across from Washington D.C. to San Francisco.
• Japan to Hawaii is 3,500 miles.
• Japan to Alaska is 2,500 miles.
• Japan to Guadalcanal is 3,200 miles.
• Japan’s navy knew no bounds.
• Japan set up outposts (small atolls with runways) to keep supplies and air support going.
April 18, 1942

• 16 B-25's took off from the U.S.S. Hornet and bombed Tokyo.

• Japan was literally shell-shocked! How dare someone attack us!
The war against Japan had started.

The story would not be complete without discussing the dynamics between General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz.

Most readers of WWII history have heard of the battles on:

- Iwo Jima - ~18,000 Japanese, 6,800 Americans killed – 36 days
- Okinawa - ~110,000 Japanese, 12,500 Americans killed - 82 days
- Tarawa – 4,690 Japanese, 894 Americans killed, 3 days
- Marianas
- Philippines
- Midway
Peleliu Campaign during WWII

Consisted of Anguar Island, Peleliu Island, Ngedbus Island, and Kongauru Island (these plus others in the area collectively known as Palau).
Where is Peleliu (and Anguar)?

• 1,700 miles from Japan

• One of the last bastions of Japanese air support
What happened there?

• Typical of other island battles, except . . . MacArthur and Nimitz agreed that no more than 3 days were needed to take the island as the Japanese were beaten down and had no will to continue.

• 30+ days later, the islands were secured. Why?

The Japanese had changed their tactics – both strategic AND tactical
Anguar Island
~Six miles long, two miles wide; 12,000 - 15,000 Japanese
Colonel Kunio Nagakawa, commander of all Palau Japanese troops, headquartered on Peleliu
Measure the distance between multiple points on the ground

Length: 6.01 Miles

Show Elevation Profile

Mouse Navigation
Capturing Hill 100 in Central Peleliu, 24 September 1944. Map by John Gilhes.
Peleliu Timeline

- September 5, 1944 – Bombardment starts on Peleliu
- September 12 – Navy pounds Anguar and Peleliu some more
- September 13 – Marines 1\textsuperscript{st} Division lands on Peleliu
- September 16 – Army 81\textsuperscript{st} Division on ships awaiting orders; “As we waited offshore, looking out we could see bodies floating – bodies of dead Marines.” PFC, Ed Frazer, 317\textsuperscript{th} Artillery
- September 17 – Pre-dawn bombardment starts on Anguar
- September 17 – Army lands on Anguar
- September 23 – Army reinforces Marines on Peleliu who underestimated the Japanese force*

* Enter the names of General Rupertus, U.S. Marines; General Mueller, U.S. Army
U.S. grenade

Japanese grenade
A soldier had to learn quickly of Dangers/Risks

- Snipers
- Coral
- Heat
- Monsoon rains
- Hidden bunkers
- Suicide runs
- Nighttime
- Flies
- *Sounds*
- Death of buddies
- Prisoners?
The Marine 1\textsuperscript{st} Division had walked into a meat grinder
- Japanese tactics and snipers were taking their toll
- Questionable command structure
- Huge losses of lives and many wounded

\textit{Army 81}\textsuperscript{st} Division moved from Anguar to Peleliu
The positions of the 321st and 323rd Regimental units around the Pocket on 17 October 1944. Map by John Gilkes.
“I was leading a group trying to get down inside the bowl. I got over the cliff, one guy behind me, and one guy behind him, when we were shot at. We heard the pop but didn’t know where the noise came from. James Cooley was right behind me and had his helmet lying against me. There was another shot, it went by my head and hit him in the forehead just under the helmet. He only groaned and leaned over on me.”

Brooks Nicklas, Company C, Infantry, 81st Division
Capturing Hill 100 in Central Peleliu, 24 September 1944. Map by John Gilkes.
“Riflemen rigged up phosphorus luminous hand grenades on a wire. When somebody trips the wire, the grenade pops up about 10-15 feet. One went off. My second gunner wanted to toss a grenade, but I told him to keep quiet and wait. They were sweating us out. Nobody fired a shot. It was dark. All of a sudden it got darker than dark. I opened up my machine gun. Somebody fell at my feet. I’m still firing. I didn’t stop until the whole belt was gone. Everything became silent after that. It was very hot and very sticky. We waited. We sweated. Morning never seemed to come.”

Sgt. Joe Abreu, Company C, 81st Division
Wildcats struggling up a steep slope while attacking the Japanese. Courtesy U.S. Army Military History Institute.
“He* stumbled on a grenade and it started sizzling, so he picked it up and tried to throw it because you can’t run from them. When he threw it, it blew up a few feet from him. ‘It’s nothing. I don’t hurt from it.’ The next day we found he had passed away. I don’t think he lived more than 3 or 4 hours.”

Pfc Roy Bergeron, Company C, 81st Division

*PFC Samuel Sylvester “Buddy” Blair’s action saved the lives of 5 men. He was 18 years old, and awarded the Purple heart and Silver Star posthumously.
“Some Japanese would crawl up close to our lines and holler ‘corpsman.’ Wounded Marines would call ‘corpsman’, we called ‘medic’ when we were wounded, so we knew it was Japanese. [the Japanese didn’t know that the Army had replaced the Marines] We answered, and waited for them to get closer, and then we threw grenades in their direction.”

Pvt. James Ijames, 81st, 323rd.
Major Dallas Pilliod, Private Andrew J. Forte, and Staff Sergeant Louis Sosnosky, 321st RCT, seek cover behind a smoking knocked-out tank on Dead Man’s Curve. Courtesy National Archives (111-SC-282140).
“The next morning [October 18], the gun crews, my squad, and four men from F Company, joined us with a 60mm mortar. Just when we were ready to set up, the Japs cut loose with mortars. They had us zeroed in, dropped about four rounds right in the middle of us. We scattered in every direction. Some of us went back to see about the wounded. Lt. Walter B. Mason was hit in the back, part of his spine blown away; he died a few moments later. Four [other] men were dead. They must have died from concussion; I could not find a mark or a wound. Philip Blunt, my buddy, had the knuckles on his right hand knocked out.”

Sgt. Nolton Brown, 81st.
Killed in Action – not counting “other casualties”

- Anguar – 1,338 Japanese, 264 U.S. Army
- Peleliu – ~11,000 Japanese, 843 U.S. Marines*, 282 U.S. Army
- Unknown number of civilians/laborers

*1,252 total with smaller battles in Palau area
ANGAUR ISLAND

Upon Bitter Reality There Shall Be Built A Peace

Old Glory Waves Over Fallen Sons
Peleliu Timeline (cont.)

• October 13, 1944 - Battle of Anguar considered over
• MacArthur steps ashore on Leyte - Oct 20, 1944
• November 27, 1944 - Battle of Peleliu considered over
• Marines 1st Division sent to Philippines
• Army 81st Division sent to Leyte on May 3, 1945 to clean up last resistance
• Both divisions given R&R, and then landing briefings on what to expect on Japan main island
• Okinawa scheduled for April 1, 1945
• Landing in Japan scheduled for September 1945
Operation Downfall

- Estimated up to 2 million U.S. military might be needed
- Estimated might take to end of 1947 to finish war

32 Army Divisions (81st was to be one first, followed by other divisions sailing from Europe)

6 Marine Divisions
• There were 36,000 American, Australian, and other allies in Japanese POW camps
• ¼ had died in captivity
• When U.S. stepped ashore, by order of Hideki Tojo (General of the Imperial Japanese Army) all remaining POWs were to be immediately executed
Key Dates

July 16, 1945
August 6, 1945
August 9, 1945

Kokura was primary target but cloud cover and smoke made plane detour to Nagasaki
August 13, 1,000 U.S. aircraft flew over Tokyo and bombed it; not one Japanese aircraft was available to intercept them
Japan formally surrenders

August 15, 1945

500 U.S. aircraft flew over the U.S.S. Missouri, anchored in Tokyo Bay, at the moment all documents were signed

As of September, 2018, Japan and Russia have never signed a peace treaty ending WWII hostilities between them
John Mitchell, Company K, 323rd Infantry

“I shall never forget the night of 10th of August. We had spent the night preparing our packs and equipment and were to leave at 3:00 A.M. to embark on boats heading for outlying areas where we would once again face the Japanese. We would be at sea for 10 days. We began to hear shouting. When the news reached us, we learned that the war had, in fact, ended. There was no place to go to celebrate in the dark jungles.”
Estimated 7,000,000 Japanese were captured and surrendered and brought back to Japan

“I experienced the shock of surrender – it was worse than dying.”
Unknown returning Japanese soldier
U.S. Army 81st sent to Japan as part of Occupation Force

General MacArthur had banned ALL ammunition from Allies when they landed

Notice anything missing?
December 7, 1945, Emperor Hirohito visited Nagasaki
Over the span of a month+, 81st Army gradually made their way on various ships and headed home to be carpenters, insurance salesmen, barbers, farmers, and business people.
Lt. Dick Cole, co-pilot to Jimmy Doolittle, Plane #1 to lift off from U.S.S. Hornet
A Japanese three-man Mitsubishi tank from WWII on the Pacific island of Peleliu in Pauau, July 31, 2014. (AFP Photo/Richard W. Brooks)
The entrance to the "1,000 Man Cave" on Peleliu island, where the Japanese dug systems of low-ceiling caves, July 31, 2014 (AFP Photo/Richard W. Brooks)
A crashed Japanese Zero fighter from World War II resting on the island of Peleliu in Palau, July 31, 2014 (AFP Photo/Richard W. Brooks)
Further reading:

- “The Pacific War 1941-1945”, John Costello
- “Stalin: Waiting for Hitler 1929-1941”, Stephen Kotkin
- “Victory at Peleliu”, Blair and DeCioccio
- “Lords of Finance”, Liaquat Ahamed
- declassified Army report
Approximately 70 pages
Thank you

Please go OLLI online and leave comments
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