

**WORLD WAR II:
70 YEARS AGO**

PELELIU: 1944

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"Peleliu is a horrible place. ... For sheer brutality and fatigue, I think it surpasses anything yet seen in the Pacific."

—Robert "Pepper" Martin, *Time* magazine
September 1944

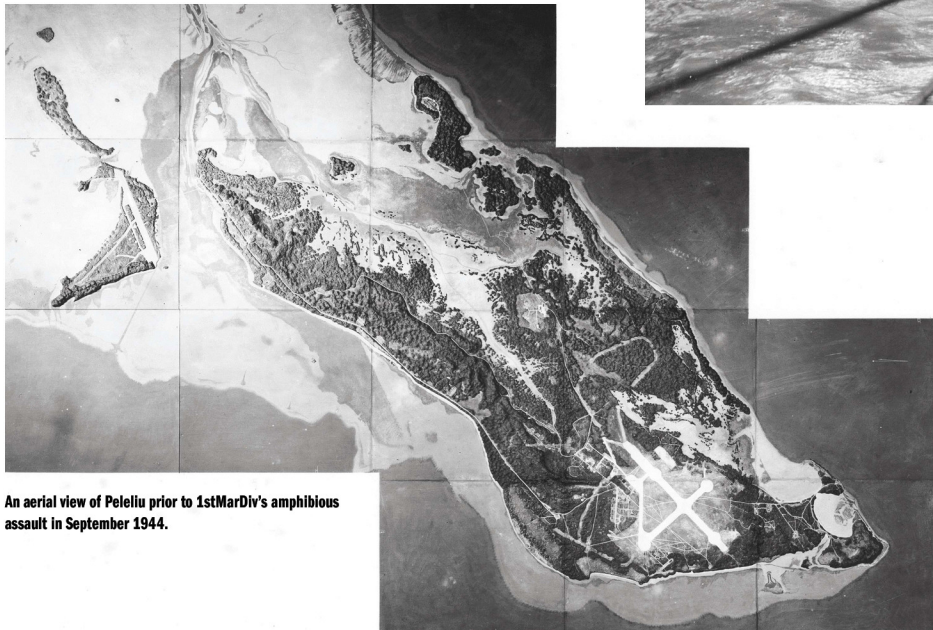
This one was going to be tough but brief, hard fought yet over in a few days, something akin to what the Second Marine Division had experienced on Betio Island in the Tarawa Atoll the previous year. That was the word filtering down through the ranks of the 1stMarDiv during the middle weeks of September 1944 as the assault transports carrying the Division closed upon the objective.

By then, most of the Marines of the 1stMarDiv had seen terrain models and aerial photographs of the area. It was an island called Peleliu in the Palau Islands, the very westernmost group of the

immense Caroline Chain. Peleliu is an oddly shaped island, looking something like a lobster claw. It isn't very big, barely 7 miles long by 2 miles wide. Compared to the Division's previous campaign, fought on the 370-mile-long New Britain earlier that year, it was, as one Marine remarked, "Like a peanut in a cement sack."

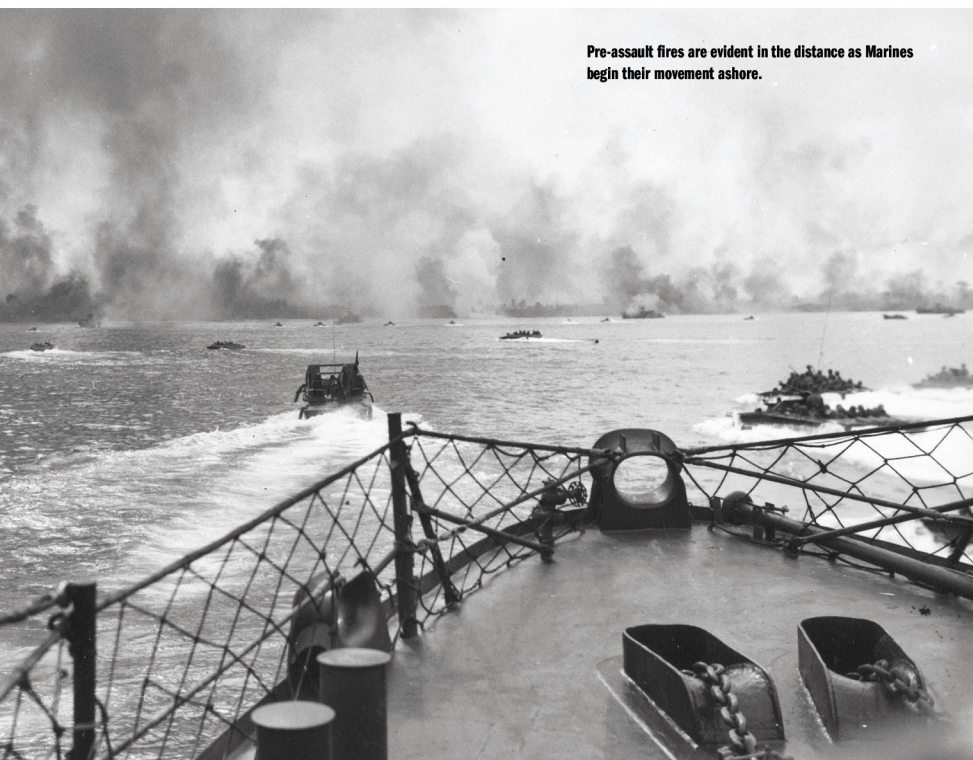
Despite the vast difference in size between New Britain and Peleliu, the goals of both campaigns were much the same. At New Britain, during the early months of 1944, 1stMarDiv had been tasked with eliminating the Japanese threat to the flank and rear of the forces of U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur making their way up the east coast of nearby New Guinea. The Japanese airfield and troop concentrations on the western end of New Britain, Cape Gloucester, could not be left undisturbed.

Then, with MacArthur about to launch one of the major American offensives of



An aerial view of Peleliu prior to 1stMarDiv's amphibious assault in September 1944.

Pre-assault fires are evident in the distance as Marines begin their movement ashore.



USMC

the war, the liberation of the Philippines, 1stMarDiv would, once again, be “MacArthur’s Marines.” Peleliu, with its excellent Japanese airfield and staging areas, lay squarely in the rear of MacArthur’s scheduled assault on the island of Leyte. The Japanese on Peleliu had to be evicted. Serving the eviction notice would be Major General William H. Rupertus’ 1stMarDiv.

Waiting ashore, deeply dug in and almost impossible to detect from a distance, were the 10,700 troops of Colonel Kunio Nakagawa’s Battle Group of the 14th Div, Imperial Japanese Army. Seasoned and experienced veterans of campaigns in China, they would prove uncommonly hard to dislodge. Little more than a stone’s throw away to the north, on the island of Babelthup, largest of the Palaus, were 20,000 additional battle-hardened Japanese veterans.

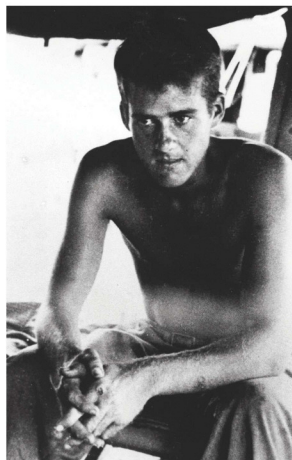
D-day on Peleliu, 15 Sept. 1944, dawned sizzling hot. Marines encased in the steel hulls of amtracs (amphibian tractors, the grandfather of today’s AAV) already were sipping from their canteens as the circling

amphibians began to form up in line, awaiting the wave guide commander’s signal to head shoreward.

One of the Marines tensely anticipating the movement ashore was Private Eugene B. Sledge, a 60 mm mortarman in the ranks of Captain Andrew A. Haldane’s Company K, 3d Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment. Quickly dubbed “Sledgehammer” by the older hands in the company, he had purposely “bilged out” of Officer Candidates School in order to be assigned to a combat unit.

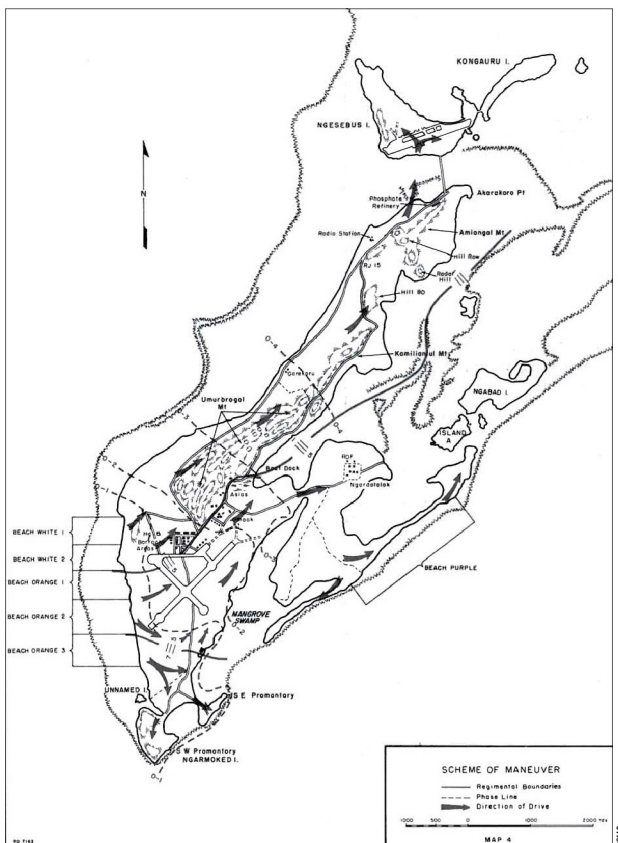
He was about to realize his wish, and he was terrified. It wasn’t a fear of death or dismemberment that gripped him. Rather it was a stomach-tightening dread that he would fail the ultimate test, that “my bladder would surely empty itself and reveal me to be the coward I was.”

Sledge could have spared himself the worry. During the coming days of unrelenting battle, Sledgehammer would prove to be all the combat Marine anyone could want. Even as the young Alabamian wrestled with his fears, the curtain of



COURTESY OF COL JOSEPH ALEXANDER, USMC (RET)

Pvt Eugene B. “Sledgehammer” Sledge later wrote “With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa.”



naval gunfire on the beach lifted, and the wave of amtracs crossed the line of departure and entered a firestorm.

No one knew it then, but COL Nakagawa's defense plan was something that never before had been encountered in the Pacific. The entire island of Peleliu was one single fortified position. With nearly 11,000 Japanese dug in on Peleliu, there was scarcely any bit of dry land where a man could set foot without encountering an armed and determined enemy. Col John T. Seldon, Division Chief of Staff, summed it up neatly, "There was no place on Peleliu where you couldn't be confronted by Japanese in numbers." The term close combat could have been created specifically for what was to come.

The assault on Peleliu was conducted by all three of the 1stMarDiv's infantry regiments—1st Marines, 5th Marines, 7th Marines. As the amtracs carrying the

leading waves made their way over Peleliu's wide fringing reef, Japanese fire was coming from every direction. There was no place in the inshore approaches to Peleliu that wasn't under constant and accurate fire. COL Nakagawa's fire plan left not an inch uncovered by weapons of all calibers zeroed in on overlapping and interlocking fields of fire.

Casualties among the landing waves were immediate. The water between the final control line and the landing beaches was littered with the burning hulks of amtracs and DUKWs (amphibious trucks) that sent a cloud of smoke over the scene. There were others, though, those that escaped being hit in that blizzard of lead and steel. Making their way grimly forward through that carefully constructed killing zone, they finally made the beach to gain a foothold.

On White Beach, the Division's left

flank, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen V. Sabol's 3d Bn, 1st Marines was under vicious fire from a Japanese stronghold that was dubbed "The Point." Solidly burrowed into a 30-foot coral outcropping and heavily covered with reinforced concrete, the position had not been touched by two days of naval gunfire. From that protected vantage point, the Japanese could place every landing beach under accurate and intense flat-trajectory enfilade fire. Any attempt to attack The Point frontally came under immediate fire from two or more supporting positions. Capt George P. Hunt's K/3/1 bore the brunt of the battle for The Point.

"I saw a ghastly mixture of bandages, bloody and mutilated skin; men gritting their teeth, resigned to wounds; men groaning and writhing in their agonies; men outstretched or twisted grotesquely transfixed in the attitudes of death; men with their entrails exposed or whole chunks of body ripped out of them."

—Capt George P. Hunt, USMC, K/3/1

When finally it was taken, The Point was found to consist of five interconnected reinforced concrete bunkers housing a number of heavy machine guns and a pair of automatic 40 mm antipersonnel guns. Riflemen and light machine-guns in covered individual positions provided covering fires from numerous directions. In overcoming the defenses of The Point, 3/1 paid a price of 300 casualties to subdue that one small murderous bit of Peleliu. It was a preview of things to come many times over.

Every Marine on Peleliu was constantly under Japanese fire. Down the line on the right, 3d Bn, 5th Marines lost its executive officer and battalion commander less than five hours after going ashore. Every inch of ground ashore was bitterly contested, a resistance that culminated in a Japanese tank-infantry counterattack that swept over the airfield during the afternoon of D-day.

The Japanese Type 95 light tank was no match for the M4 Shermans of LtCol Arthur J. Stuart's 1st Tank Bn. Every Japanese tank was destroyed, but the Marine advance was halted short of the airfield. It was the first, last and, except for persistent nighttime infiltrators, the only time that most Marines saw a live Japanese above ground on Peleliu.

As darkness fell, getting off the beach had cost the 1stMarDiv nearly 1,200 casualties, most of them among Col Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller's 1st Marines which suffered heavily in reducing The Point. There were other casualties as well. A dismaying number of Marines had been felled by Peleliu's broiling heat, with the



USMC

Marines move up the ridge northeast of the airfield on the island of Peleliu.

thermometer climbing to 114 degrees. Cases of heat prostration and heat stroke were not uncommon. Corporal E. P. Warren summarized Peleliu accurately: "By day, Peleliu was a furnace. At night, it cooled down to only an oven."

With the heat came thirst. Blazing, searing heat of a nature not encountered on Guadalcanal or New Britain literally sucked moisture from men, drying mouths and throats, turning tongues to blocks of wood. The water that managed to be taken ashore turned out to be in 55-gallon drums that had previously held gasoline and was tainted accordingly. Marines desperate for anything wet downed the unappetizing mix and paid the price in convulsive and painful intestinal cramps. When a man is thirsty enough, and the only choice is between tainted water or no water at all, tainted water usually wins out.

Despite fierce Japanese resistance, by the afternoon of D+3 the 1stMarDiv had firmly established a line completely across the lower end of Peleliu. The all-important airfield was solidly held. Getting there had provided Pvt Sledge with his own personal

near encounter with mortality. During the advance of K/3/5 across the airfield, he had thrown himself to the ground to avoid being cut in two by a furious burst of Japanese machine-gun fire only to discover he narrowly had missed landing on the pressure plate of a 500-pound bomb rigged as a mine.

With the south end of Peleliu firmly in Marine hands, the attack then would be faced with an advance into the island's long central spine, a nightmare terrain of ridges and draws all tumbled together as though dumped there with no rhyme or reason. It was a region perfectly suited for defense, an absolute hell to attack.

"Ravines, which on the maps and photographs appeared to be steep sided, actually had sheer cliffs for sides, some of them 50 to 100 feet high. With nothing else on your mind but to cover the distance between two points, walking was difficult. ...

There were dozens of caves and pillboxes worked into the noses of the ridges and up the ravines. It was very difficult to find blind spots as the caves and pill-

boxes were mutually supporting. These caves and pillboxes housed riflemen, machine gunners, mortars, rockets and field-pieces."

—BGen Oliver P. Smith, USMC
Assistant Division Commander, 1stMarDiv

Except for a thin covering of soil, which supported little beyond low scrub growth, the central spine of Peleliu was essentially solid coral. With plenty of time and proper tools for the job, the Japanese constructed scores of protected positions that bristled with firepower. Worse, those positions were all but impossible to detect from any distance and were impervious to anything short of a direct hit.

For a Marine out in the open, it was a different story. Private First Class Irvin R. "Dick" Stone, a rifleman with A/1/5, said it as well as anyone: "Dig a fighting hole in that coral? With nothing but an entrenching tool? You might as well have tried to break up a block of ice with a toothpick. About the best you could do was pile a few chunks of coral in front of you and hope for the best."

Combat up on the ridges of Peleliu was a situation custom-made for graphic, descriptive words. Brutal. Hellish. Grinding. Battering. Murderous. Pick any one, and it would fit. Or simply settle for Sledgehammer's one-size-fits-all, "Life at the animal level." It was that bad, and it went on day after day, around the clock with no respite. And the blazing heat never let up.

The Horseshoe. Five Sisters. The Umurbrogol Pocket. Death Valley. Bloody Nose Ridge. Previously unnamed and unremarkable bits and pieces of Peleliu became names written in blood, and there was a great deal of blood spilled on them. A great amount of ordnance was unleashed on them as well. "Blind 'em, blast 'em, burn 'em" became a catchphrase and eventually a doctrine, as Marines used white phosphorus, demolition charges and flame throwers on Japanese defenders determined to fight for as long as they drew breath.

With the airfield operational and securely in Marine possession, the never-ending assaults on the ground then could be supported by Marines in the air. At Bloody Nose Ridge the inverted gull-wing F4U Corsairs flew what still may be the shortest

close air support missions ever. The target was practically just off the end of the runway. It wasn't even necessary to bring up the landing gear, just zero in on the target, release the bombs or napalm, swing around 360 degrees, touch down, rearm and do it again. And again. And again.

On the ground, the casualty lists were growing at a frightening rate. Up on the ridges there was no place that could be considered absolutely secure. Anyone anywhere could be shot at; the Japanese fire plan was that good. Out in front at the assault level, a Marine's life was at risk with every step.

"It was worse than anything I experienced at Cape Gloucester. I don't think there was any bit of dead space on Peleliu. Even in defilade you could be taken under mortar fire. We used Willy-Peter (white phosphorus) grenades to blind supporting positions, but there were a lot of those you couldn't spot until they opened up on you."

—PFC Irvin R. "Dick" Stone, USMC, A/1/5

The campaign that was going to be "tough but short" was certainly proving to be tough, but it certainly was not shap-

ing up as short. The days of constant unrelenting combat stretched into weeks, and September gave way to October.

The casualties continued to mount, and they could not be replaced. With the expectation of a short campaign, the provision of a replacement draft afloat had been thought unnecessary. With no one to take the place of the fallen, unit strengths contracted, with ever fewer able-bodied hands to take on the same duties.

How bad was it? It was frighteningly bad. By D+8, 1st Marines had become completely bled dry, shot to pieces with 60 percent casualties. In 1st Bn alone, only 74 riflemen were available. First Marines was finished as a combat unit. Backloaded aboard ship for evacuation, the Regiment's place was taken by the 321st Regimental Combat Team of the Army's 81st Infantry Div, the "Wildcats," fresh from overcoming the Japanese defenders of nearby Angaur. The soldiers would prove themselves to be fighting men as good as anyone could want.

"We in the 5th Marines had many a dead or wounded friend to report about from our ranks, but the men in the 1st Marines had so many it was appalling."

"How many men left in your company?" I asked an old Camp Elliott buddy in the 1st Marines as they passed us going out.

"Twenty is all that's left in the whole company, Sledgehammer," he choked.

"They nearly wiped us out. I'm the only one left out of the old bunch in my company that was with us in mortar school at Elliott."

—Pvt Eugene B. "Sledgehammer" Sledge, USMC, K/3/5

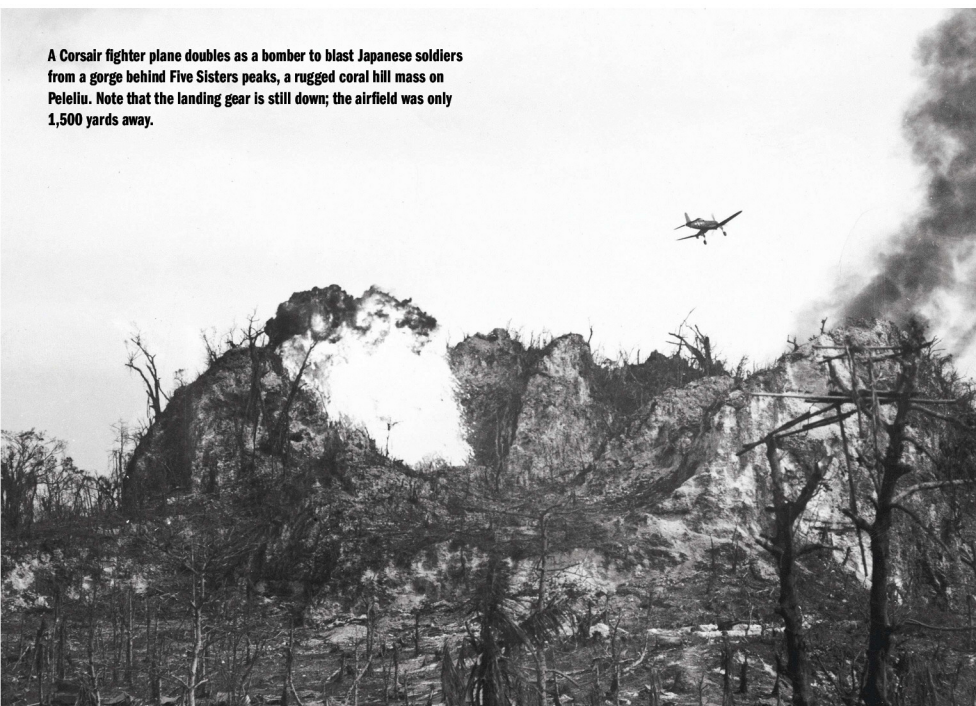
As the calendar turned its pages into October, the Japanese had been compressed into an area of about 400 by 500 yards called the Umurbrogol Pocket, the most torturous bit of terrain on Peleliu and the most ferociously defended. Every foot of ground was bitterly contested. The Marines fighting their way into that deadly ground were far beyond merely tired. Not even bone weary describes the state of the average rifle-company Marine. But the fighting raged on, and the same worn-down units were sent back into it. They were ragged, unshaven, hollow-eyed, and their dirt-streaked uniforms were ripped, torn and faded. They had known too much horror and too little rest. But their weapons were spotless. And they kept going back.

"During the fighting around Umurbrogol Pocket, there was a constant movement of one weary, depleted Marine company being relieved by another slightly less

Leathernecks on the opposite side of the ridge fire at the enemy with rifle grenades.



A Corsair fighter plane doubles as a bomber to blast Japanese soldiers from a gorge behind Five Sisters peaks, a rugged coral hill mass on Peleliu. Note that the landing gear is still down; the airfield was only 1,500 yards away.



weary, depleted company. We seemed to rotate from one particularly dangerous part of the line to one slightly less so and back again constantly," remembered Pvt Sledge.

There was something else about Peleliu, something that never finds its way into news accounts or history books. There was the incredible stomach-churning stench born of rotting, putrefying human corpses, human urine and excrement, and the discarded and rotting rations of both sides. And there were flies.

"With human corpses, human excrement and rotting rations scattered across Peleliu's ridges, those nasty insects were so large, so glutted, and so lazy that some could scarcely fly. It was revolting to say the least to watch big fat blowflies leave a corpse and swarm onto our C-rations," Sledgehammer recalled.

On 15 Oct. 1944, after one month of constant battle with a tenaciously resisting enemy, the 1stMarDiv was relieved. Each of the Division's remaining infantry regiments, 5th Marines and 7th Marines, suffered at least 50 percent casualties.

Of the 10,700 Japanese defenders of Peleliu, all but 300 died there. They were

followed in death by their commander, COL Kunio Nakagawa, who ended his own life by ritual suicide, *seppuku*, rather than surrender. He was promoted posthumously to the rank of lieutenant general.

Prior to loading back aboard ship, the members of Sledgehammer's company, K/3/5, posed for a group photograph. Of the original 235 members of the company who landed on 15 Sept., there were only 85 Marines in the picture.

Afterward, in the wake of the U.S. Army's unopposed landing in the Philippines, there was an outcry that the Peleliu operation had been unnecessary. Historians still argue the point. What cannot be argued is that at the time, with the intelligence that was available, both GEN Douglas MacArthur, Commander in Chief, Southwest Pacific, and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Ocean Areas, believed it was necessary to neutralize Peleliu before the Japanese in the Philippines could be attacked.

Maybe it was a Marine who closed the book on Peleliu. As he heaved himself, ragged, dirty and exhausted over the rail of the transport that would take him away from the place where hell had raged, he

was approached by a member of the ship's crew.

"Did you get any souvenirs over there, Marine? I'll buy them," the seaman offered.

The Marine patted the seat of his torn and filthy dungarees. "That's my souvenir of Peleliu, pal."

Author's note: It was my privilege and good fortune in later years to know Sledgehammer, the late Eugene B. Sledge, Ph.D., as a valued friend. While combat may be experienced, it is uncommonly hard to describe. In his magnificent personal memoir of his experience as a combat Marine in the Pacific, "With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa," Sledgehammer vividly brings to life the realities of combat that very few ever have equaled.

Author's bio: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.

