



## *The Battle over Peleliu: Islander, Japanese, and American Memories of War*

by Stephen C. Murray.

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Stephen C. Murray was first introduced to Peleliu, the best know island in the Palau archipelago in the western Pacific about two thousand miles from Japan, as a Peace Corps volunteer in the mid-1960s. Some forty years later, he completed a doctorate in anthropology at the University of California-Santa Barbara. These personal experiences help explain his approach to his subject in this welcome new book on Peleliu. In the Peace Corps, Murray was adopted by a woman from the island and accepted into the local community; his wife, too, is from the Palau Islands. These ties have given him exceptional access to the oral testimony of elders and other islanders. His academic training gave him the anthropological methodology to construct the argument of his book and to challenge previous work on Peleliu.

The long and intricate history of pre-World War II Peleliu has been neglected by historians and anthropologists. Since the war, interest has naturally focused on the Battle of Peleliu (15 Sept.-27 Nov. 1944), seen as either a heroic moment for US forces or a glorious defeat for the Japanese.<sup>1</sup> The plight of the islanders themselves during the struggle between two foreign armies is seldom considered: “the visitors to Peleliu and their historiographies share the same trait: they focus obsessively on their own war stories and concerns and completely ignore the residents of Peleliu, the third people caught up in the maelstrom of the battle, as if their history has no importance” (1). Murray’s purpose in *The Battle over Peleliu* is to make good that glaring omission.

In chapter 1, “History, Memory, and Island Landscapes,” Murray explains that history for the inhabitants of the Palau Islands is primarily local, centering on family, clan, and village. It is transmitted through oral stories, songs, and dances, as well as legends and myths. For islanders, the land they inhabit is in the fullest sense where their family history plays out, quite apart from its economic value or military potential. From a western perspective, the lack of written records on population, economic development, and other statistical information presents a serious obstacle for historians.

Chapter 2, “Colonial Masters and Island Society,” reviews the islands’ domination by, successively, Spain (1885-99), Germany (1899-1914), Japan (1914-45), and the United States before their independence in 1994. As context for the Second World War, the period of Japan’s control of the economic and military development of the area and relations between colonizers and inhabitants dominate the narrative. The Japanese initially expanded the economy of Palau, investing in fisheries, agriculture, and other areas that provided jobs and economic advancement. Chapter 3, “Smiling Sky, Gathering Clouds,” explains that “the major prewar disruptions on Peleliu came in three distinct phases” (52): the opening of mines to extract phosphates, a land registration program that upset local land patterns, and the building of an airfield that required the evacuation of local villagers to clear the necessary land.

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1. See, e.g., Bobby C. Blair and John Peter DeCioccio, *Victory at Peleliu: The 81st Infantry Division's Pacific Campaign* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2011), with review by Jonathan Beard at *MiWSR* 2012-003.

While prewar economic development had its benefits, Japan also adopted a racial policy that treated the population “with arrogance and contempt.... Everybody remembered with distaste the fixed racial hierarchy ... and the superior attitude assumed toward islanders by Japanese officials and immigrants” (24, 60). As the threat of war increased, Japan introduced harsh measures to control the population, including beatings and bans on alcohol and cigarettes. Increasingly, Japan saw the islands only in military terms, as a plentiful source of phosphates (used in fertilizers) and as an airbase for its fighter and bomber aircraft. The Japanese also imported Japanese, Okinawan, and Korean workers to build the landing strip. “Both the displaced villagers and their hosts accommodated themselves to their new circumstances as best they could, but their lives had taken on an air of uncertainty and foreboding” (72).

In chapter 4, “War,” Murray discusses the value of Peleliu for the United States. He portrays the famous battle for the island as a three-part struggle that inflicted on the local population a difficult period of suffering and turmoil. The war had seemed to be going on at a safe distance, but in 1944 American aircraft carriers attacked the Peleliu airfield and the First Marine Division landed on the island. The Japanese were under orders not to surrender and to make the Americans pay a high price for their inevitable victory. To achieve that goal, they dug into defensive positions in mountain shelters and caves. Col. Nakagawa Kunio, who later died on the island, fully embraced the mandate to “delay the American attackers and sell each island for the highest possible cost in lives” (85). The Americans, however, had already mastered the techniques of amphibious warfare at Tarawa and Saipan; they arrived “with both the technological capacity and the will to lay waste to anything in their paths” (76). Murray observes that “the American forces’ use of fire ... best represents [their] readiness to employ, in a war of extermination, the most terrible weapons” (93).

Murray’s primary subject, however, is not the battle itself, but, as the book’s title indicates, the struggle over its memory. His succinct, impartial treatment of the fiercely fought battle never loses sight of his primary thesis: “What for the Japanese military was a strand to defend with mines, obstacles, and bunkers and for the American military a beachhead to bombard and wrest from the enemy, was to dozens of Peleliu families their ancestral homeland” (88).

Chapter 5, “Exile, Fear, and Hunger,” concerns the “12 dark and terrible months, from September 1944 until hostilities ended on August 15, 1945” (100). Life became a struggle for survival, as schools and hospitals ceased to function. But the oral histories reflect ambivalent memories, mixing stories of hunger and death with accounts of supportive village life that sustained the local islanders “trapped within a war brought to their world by foreigners” (101).

In the postwar era, as described in chapter 6, “An Island Desolated, A Trust Betrayed, 1946–1994,” the ecological disaster resulting from burnt forests, stripped farmland, napalm, DDT, unexploded ordnance, and polluted fishing grounds has threatened the islanders’ traditional way of life up to the present day.

The last three chapters examine “the return of Japanese and American servicemen and civilians to Peleliu to commemorate their experiences from World War II” (145). Japanese and American commemorations and emotional responses differ sharply. Chapter 7, “Retrieving the Dead,” indicates that Japanese tourists or private agencies often seek out the burial places or bones of relatives in order to leave a wreath or message about future peace. On the other hand, the Japanese government still caters to the right-wing denials of Japanese culpability.

Chapter 8, “Remembering a Painful Victory,” points out that would-be American visitors are deterred by the remoteness of Peleliu and the difficulties of traveling there. American veterans recall the island only as the site of a hard fought battle. Chapter 9, “Parallel Histories,” explains that, for both

Japanese and Americans, the lives and sufferings of Peleliu's indigenous people remain a topic of little interest.

Murray's conclusion, "The Roots of the Plant," is an excellent historiographical essay comparing the accounts of the battle written by American and Japanese scholars. He criticizes the histories that confine themselves to the brutality of the battle and the forbidding landscape that the combatants endured. He has little patience with "objective" histories that gloss over or elide the failures of Marine leadership and the decision to invade an island of (by fall 1944) doubtful strategic value in the first place. By contrast, he characterizes a superior Japanese commander as suffering "success in defeat" (200–201). He praises E.B. Sledge's classic *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981) for its willingness "to reveal, as never before, the obscenity of war" (203).

Appropriately, Murray gives the final word to an old woman of the island: "We of Peleliu come from here and we are taking care of it for the world. We are the roots of the plant. They—the Americans and Japanese—are flowers: they are beautiful, but they wither eventually. We take care of the roots for the whole world" (227).

I strongly recommend *The Battle over Peleliu* to anyone seeking a well balanced, nuanced study of the conflicting memories that have shaped the lives of Americans, Japanese, and, most importantly, inhabitants of the Palau Islands.