

With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa

by E. B. Sledge · Language: EN

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Overview

E. B. Sledge's "With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa" is a harrowing and unflinching memoir of a young Marine's experiences fighting in the Pacific Theater during World War II. Sledge, a mortarman with K Company, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, recounts his journey from basic training to the brutal, prolonged battles on the islands of Peleliu and Okinawa. The book meticulously details the extreme physical and psychological toll of combat, portraying the relentless heat, constant fear, disease, and the dehumanizing nature of fighting a fanatical enemy in unforgiving terrain.

Sledge's narrative is renowned for its raw honesty and vivid descriptions of the horrors he witnessed and endured, including the stench of death, the scarcity of water, the prevalence of disease, and the constant threat of Japanese banzai charges and snipers. He explores the profound camaraderie forged among the Marines, a bond essential for survival in the face of unimaginable adversity, while also touching upon the psychological scars that lingered long after the war. The book stands as a vital historical document and a powerful testament to the sacrifices made by those who fought in one of the most brutal campaigns of the war, offering an unparalleled look into the mind of a combat infantryman.

Key Takeaways

- Combat in the Pacific Theater was characterized by extreme brutality, environmental harshness, and a fanatical enemy, pushing human endurance to its absolute limits.
- The psychological toll of prolonged, intense combat can be as devastating as physical wounds, leading to profound and lasting trauma.
- Camaraderie and mutual reliance among soldiers are crucial for survival and maintaining sanity in the face of overwhelming adversity.
- The dehumanization of the enemy, while a coping mechanism in war, can lead to horrific acts and moral compromises.
- Understanding the true nature of war requires confronting its ugliness and the immense suffering it inflicts on all participants.
- Even after returning home, the experiences of war continue to shape veterans' lives, often manifesting as invisible wounds.

- The meticulous recording of experiences, even years later, can provide invaluable historical insight and personal catharsis.

Chapter Summaries

Part I: From Alabama to the Pacific

Sledge recounts his upbringing in Alabama, his decision to enlist in the Marine Corps, and the rigorous, often brutal, training he underwent. He describes the transformation from civilian to Marine, the development of discipline, and the formation of bonds with his fellow recruits. This section sets the stage for the extreme challenges ahead, highlighting the innocence lost and the harsh realities of military life that began even before reaching the battlefield.

Part II: Peleliu – The Landing and Bloody Nose Ridge

This part details the initial landing on Peleliu, the unexpected ferocity of Japanese resistance, and the immediate descent into hellish combat. Sledge describes the intense heat, lack of water, and the constant threat from hidden enemy positions. The narrative focuses heavily on the battle for 'Bloody Nose Ridge,' a series of heavily fortified coral ridges where the Marines faced relentless, close-quarters fighting against a deeply entrenched and fanatical enemy, resulting in horrific casualties and psychological trauma.

Part III: Okinawa – The Mud and the Rain

Following Peleliu, Sledge's company is deployed to Okinawa. This section vividly portrays the different but equally brutal conditions: constant rain, deep mud, and the pervasive stench of death. The fighting is characterized by attritional warfare against a well-prepared enemy in a landscape turned into a quagmire. Sledge details the exhaustion, the constant fear of snipers and artillery, and the psychological toll of fighting in such a miserable and deadly environment.

Part IV: The Aftermath and Return Home

Sledge describes the final, desperate stages of the Okinawa campaign, the eventual victory, and the profound sense of relief mixed with the lingering trauma. He recounts the journey home, the stark contrast between the war zone and civilian life, and the difficulties of readjusting. This part touches on the invisible wounds of war, the struggle to articulate experiences to those who weren't there, and the enduring impact of combat on his psyche.

Themes

- Brutality of war
- Psychological trauma
- Camaraderie and survival
- Dehumanization of combat

- Loss of innocence

Notable Quotes

- "The stench of death was overpowering. It was the smell of decaying human flesh, a smell I would never forget." — Describing the pervasive smell on Peleliu, a constant reminder of the horrific casualties.
- "When I got home, I couldn't talk about it. No one wanted to hear it. No one could understand it." — Reflecting on the difficulty of sharing his combat experiences with civilians after returning from the war.
- "We were living like animals, and many of us were becoming animals." — Describing the dehumanizing conditions and the psychological impact of prolonged, brutal combat.
- "The Japanese soldier was a formidable foe. He fought with a fanaticism that was beyond our comprehension." — Commenting on the enemy's tenacity and the psychological challenge it posed to the American Marines.
- "I was a young man when I went to war, but I was old when I came home." — A poignant reflection on the profound and irreversible change wrought by his combat experiences.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa about?

It's a memoir by E. B. Sledge, a U.S. Marine, detailing his harrowing experiences fighting in the Pacific Theater during World War II, specifically the brutal battles of Peleliu and Okinawa. It provides an unflinching, first-person account of the physical and psychological toll of combat, the extreme conditions, and the camaraderie among soldiers.

Is With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa worth reading?

Yes, it is widely considered one of the most important and authentic combat memoirs ever written. Its raw honesty, vivid descriptions, and deep psychological insights make it essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the true nature of war, particularly the Pacific campaign of WWII. It offers a powerful, unvarnished perspective.

How does With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa end?

Spoiler: The book ends with Sledge's company surviving the Okinawa campaign and returning home. He describes the stark contrast between the war zone and civilian life, the difficulty of readjustment, and the lasting psychological impact of his experiences. He reflects on the profound changes within himself and the struggle to articulate the horrors he witnessed to those who were not there.

Who should read With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa?

This book is highly recommended for military historians, veterans, students of World War II, and anyone interested in the psychological effects of combat. It's a crucial read for those who want an authentic, unromanticized understanding of what it was like to be an infantryman in the Pacific War.

How long does it take to read With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa?

On average, it takes approximately 5 to 7 hours to read "With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa." This estimate is based on an average reading speed of 250 words per minute and the book's typical length of around 250-300 pages.