

*Bitter Peleliu*, by Joseph Wheelan. Oxford: Osprey, 2022, 336pp. ISBN 978-1-4728-4950-2

There is a mass of literature at present adopting the ‘face of battle’ perspective, and such works, generally books rather than articles, dominate attention. That is understandable, while much of the literature is not only vivid but also instructive in what it tells us about the nature of combat. Yet this literature can also be limited, notably both repetitive in its content and ‘lessons’ and also apt to downplay questions of strategic and operational significance, and to simplify explanations of success. In addition, accessibility, archives, and language issues, ensure that history of this type is often repetitive: the same battles and the same, or similar, accounts. Thus, we have more for the Pacific War of 1941-5 than the Sino-Japanese War of 1937-45.

This history by repetition means that only a few of such books are worthy of attention. Among British writers, I find Saul David and James Holland worth reading, but Anthony Beevor and Max Hastings overrated. Among American works I have recently been impressed by Joseph Wheelan’s *Bitter Peleliu*. Wheelan, to a degree, is reprising his 2020 Okinawa study, while what he says over Peleliu will not surprise experts. The idea that the struggle has been underrated is not credible. But Wheelan is good on the nature of the combat, the experiences of the combatants, the intractability of the task and American intelligence failures. These were not only a matter of the situation prior to the landing but also during the initial fighting, notably repeated attacks on the ridges. Serious command faults are discerned, notably on the part of General William Rupertus. The lessons had to be relearned on Iwo Jima. Admiral Halsey argued that he was correct to have feared another Tarawa. A worthwhile book made more attractive by not being over-long.

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