

Senior Commanders of the 1st Marine Division on Pavuvu Island, August 1944



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This photograph was taken one month before the 1st Marine Division assaulted the island of Peleliu in 1944. From left to right:

Colonel Lewis Puller, commanding officer of the **1st Marine Regiment**. Colonel Puller had commanded 1/7 on Guadalcanal (Aug–Dec 1942) and served as the 7th Marines XO on New Britain (Dec 1943–Apr 1944). He was promoted to colonel on 1 February 1944 and assigned to 1st Marines later that month to prepare for the upcoming invasion of Peleliu (Sep–Oct 1944).

Colonel William H. Harrison, commanding officer of the **11th Marine Regiment**. Colonel Harrison had commanded the 12th Defense Battalion from August 1942 through the fighting on New Britain (Dec 1943–April 1944). He took command of 11th Marines in January 1944, eight months before the Peleliu invasion (Sep–Oct 1944).

Major General William Rupertus, commanding general of the 1st Marine Division. General Rupertus had been the assistant division commander on Guadalcanal (Aug–Dec 1942) and had then commanded the division during the Battle of New Britain (Dec 1943–April 1944). His leadership during the upcoming Battle of Peleliu—especially his indifference to mounting casualties—was criticized both in and outside the Marine Corps. During the initial landing, General Rupertus chose not to go ashore and left command to his assistant division commander, Brigadier General O.P. Smith.

Colonel Hermann Hanneken, commanding officer of the 7th Marine Regiment. Colonel Hanneken had been awarded the Medal of Honor and commissioned a lieutenant for his combat actions against rebel leaders in Haiti in 1919. On Guadalcanal, Colonel Hanneken was awarded the Silver Star for his leadership of 2/7. He took command of 7th Marines on 2 February 1944 and led the regiment during the brutal fighting on Peleliu (Sep–Oct 1944).

Colonel William S. Fellers, commanding officer of the 5th Marine Regiment. On Guadalcanal, Colonel Fellers served as XO of 5th Marines. He was promoted to colonel in May 1943 and served on the division staff during the Battle of New Britain. He took command of 5th Marines on 21 May 1944. During preparations for the invasion of Peleliu, the assistant division commander, O.P. Smith, lost faith in Fellers and, after conferring with the regimental XO, Lieutenant Colonel Lewis Walt, relieved Fellers on 17 August 1944, less than one month before the landing. Colonel Fellers was replaced by Colonel Harold “Bucky” Harris, who then led 5th Marines during the Peleliu battle.

Pavuvu was an island in the Russels Chain, northwest of Guadalcanal. In April 1944, after the New Britain battle, the 1st Marine Division was sent to Pavuvu for five months to refit and prepare for their next operation. As directed by Headquarters, Marine Corps, the infantry battalions were re-organized, dissolving their weapons companies (D, H, and M), and attaching their heavy weapons directly to the rifle companies. The Marine squad was enlarged from eleven to thirteen men and squad firepower was increased from one to three automatic rifles.

On **August 17 and 18, 1944**, the commandant of the Marine Corps, General Vandegrift, a friend of General Rupertus since their service together in China, visited the 1st Marine Division on Pavuvu. General Rupertus had injured his foot jumping from an amphibious tractor during a training event in early June. He used a cane during the Commandant’s visit but insisted that he would be fully recovered for the upcoming battle. He was not. The photograph above was likely taken during this August 1944 visit, before Colonel Fellers was relieved.

Notes:

1. General Vandegrift visits Pavuvu, August 17–18, 1944: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQmgo_RVSQM
2. Pre-operations preparations for Peleliu: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQmgo_RVSQM
3. 7th Marines on New Britain on 31 January 1944. Left to right—LtCol Odell M Conoley: 2/7. LtCol Lewis B. Puller, Regimental XO. Colonel Julian N. Frisbie: CO. LtCol Henry W. Buse: 3/7. LtCol Harry E. Weber: 1/7. Captain John E. Buckley: Regimental Weapons Company. Colonel Frisbie was succeeded by Colonel Hermann Hanneken on 21 February 1944.

