

THE UNITED STATES ASSAULT ON PELELIU IN 3MM

GAMING THE PACIFIC

The island-hopping campaigns in the western Pacific Ocean seems to get a little less love from wargamers than the average WW2 battle. It may be because the fighting in the Pacific was brutal and had limited manoeuvre given the small scale of the islands, and it's hard to make the Japanese 'fun' to play as their fate is sealed – it's just a matter of how much pain they can inflict before being ground down.

By Miles Reidy

I thought this would be an interesting challenge to design a game, both for a *Little Wars* TV episode and to run as a participation game at conventions. Here are some thoughts on how to design and play such a game.

The Peleliu campaign was chosen as it's an iconic battle, was waged in a relatively small area, and the force sizes were manageable – three USMC and one army regiment vs an understrength Japanese infantry division made of a wide range of troop qualities.

I decided to use 3mm-scale figures from the fantastic and extensive Pico Armor range and model them with one base equalling one company.

Yes, you can tell what type of tank is on the base. Most of the time. Given the chosen scale of the game, the only effective options would have been 3mm or 6mm – both would have worked.

Finally we were left with selecting the rules. There are, of course, a lot of WWII rulesets available but I couldn't find one that was exactly what I was looking for, so I decided to create my own, mostly because I enjoy doing so. They are divisional/corps-level rules for WWII that have the working title *Decisive Action*, and I will publish them one day, maybe.

The core concept of the design was the assumption that playing the Japanese would be similar to having one's hand hit, repeatedly, by a hammer,

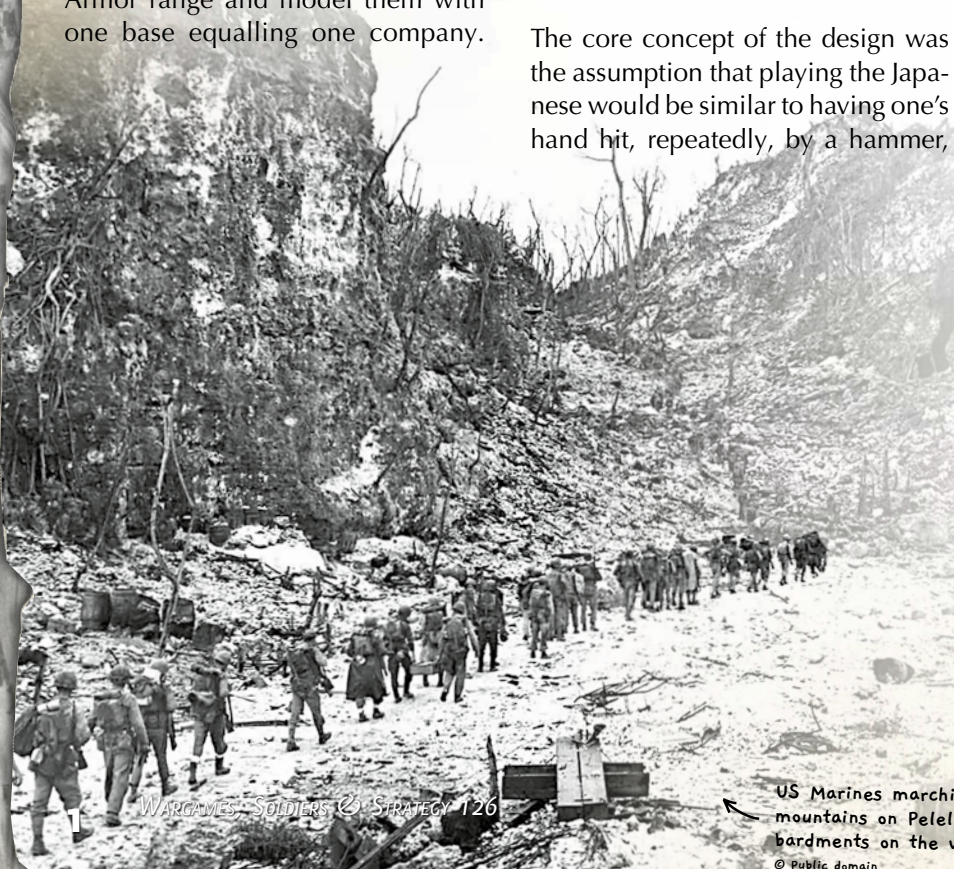


with the only unknown being how many times the hammer strikes – perhaps not the most enjoyable of experiences. So, a 'bot' was designed for the GM to use to manage the Japanese. I owe a lot of inspiration to the fun and challenging "Mr Babbage" concept from the ruleset *The Men Who Would be Kings*. All the human players were on the USMC side.

The Japanese made extensive use of the rugged terrain, and the US often lost track of the location of the Japanese formations. We managed this by using a small-scale map of the island and magnetized unit locations for the GM to move the IJA's units based on a simple set of guidelines. These guidelines were intended to mirror the new Japanese tactics that avoided wasteful frontal assaults except where there was a very high chance of success.

WINNING!

Still, this is a game and there needs to be a competitive aspect. This was rather simple to work into the victory conditions. Invading an island is all about real estate, so 25 Japanese flags





Playing Peleliu at Little Wars TV. The players all take an American role, the Japanese are GM-run.

were placed on the island at important locations such as the airfields, high points in the Umurbrogol Mountains, and other key locations the US set out as objectives in the invasion plan. As a US player captures a point, the Japanese flag is replaced with the corresponding regimental flag.

Victory in the game is a two-tiered measure. The US player has five days to amass thirteen net victory points, based on capturing Japanese flags and avoiding excessive losses. At the conclusion of the game, if the US side wins, then the overall winner of the game is the regiment that amasses the most Japanese flags. If the game's victory conditions were used with the actual historical results for the first five days, the net score would have been 9–10 – a Japanese victory. The US captured a lot of their geographic objectives but sustained horrendous casualties, including the 1st Marine regiment which endured a 60% casualty rate. It's often easy for wargamers to gloss over the grim reality of the conflicts they recreate, and we should always be respectful of

the incredible bravery of both the USMC and Japanese infantry and what they collectively experienced during a brutal fight.

To add to the fun, there is no overall US commander, despite there being significant divisional-level assets to allocate including naval bombardment, the very powerful 11th Marine artillery battalion, and an Amtrack battal-

ion that has LVT(A)(1)s and LVT(A)(4)s plus two all-important LVT companies equipped with flame-throwers. The role of the divisional commander would be randomly determined by card draw between the US regimental commanders. I was confident that self-interest would win out over faction loyalty, and in play-testing and the filming of the game for the LWTV video that proved to be the case. Many a time a USMC regiment was about to crack the Japanese defences only to see their divisional support get 're-allocated' to another regiment. Let's be honest, chaos is fun in a participation game.

HISTORICAL FLAVOUR

A simple deck of cards was used by both sides for random events, which allowed us to simulate some of the unique aspects of the campaign such as the severe water shortages the USMC endured during the first few days. Their water source came from 55-gallon fuel drums that had not been properly cleaned out – this had a debilitating effect on the US troops in the 100°F heat of a Pacific island.

For the GM-controlled Japanese, their cards dictate what they can do and are played immediately. The Japanese cards indicate where their artillery will fire, how many battalions can move through the tunnels, and any reinforcements they may receive from neighbouring islands – there were significant



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A sizeable American attack starting from the airfield into the craggy mountain range runs into Japanese defences.

Japanese forces just north of Peleliu and some managed to arrive on barges.

The US players start the game with a hand of three cards; they can play any number of them but may only draw one new card per turn. Of course, the current US divisional commander has final say of which cards get used and where. US cards typically convey a benefit such as casualty replacement, an extra air support mission, etc.

THE TERRAIN

Wargaming is a visual hobby and terrain plays a key role in both engaging players and channelling the flow of gameplay. I wanted to model the entire island of Peleliu and so I selected a scale of one inch equals 100 yards. This would require a game board roughly four feet by ten feet, and since this game needs to be easily transportable I broke the game board down into separate 2 x 4 sections.

Building terrain at a grand scale is a lot of fun but requires some attention to detail, as there is an easy comparison for the table you've created: actual maps and pictures of the battlefield.

Before building terrain, one needs to think about its effects on gameplay. In the case of Peleliu, the terrain impacted where troops could land as there were limited beaches, dense jungle and mangrove swamps, and, of course, the nightmare of the

rugged Umurbrogol Mountains. If terrain doesn't really impact gameplay, it doesn't really need to be modelled.

I perused several sources for detailed mapping information, especially when trying to build the mountains and their various topographical features. I'm probably 60% accurate but that is fine for this purpose. One historical oddity is that most pictures of the Peleliu campaign show the island like a moonscape, as the constant bombardments destroyed the vegetation. Prior to the invasion, most of the island was covered by jungle and mangrove swamps, which hid the rugged nature of the terrain from US reconnaissance efforts.



The Peleliu table was built on Gator Board (also Gator foamboard), with a cork layer on top to add texture.

I built simple plywood frames and an underlayment of a sign material called gator board – it's essentially a quarter of an inch of polystyrene layers pressed between thin layers of wood fibres. It's rather strong and light – perfect for boards that need to be transported! The island's shape is 1/4-inch cork that was affixed with construction adhesive, and then I added the mountains by hand-carving EPS foam. Vegetation is just Woodland Scenics ground foam in two colours – light green for jungle and dark green for the mangrove swamps.



The 'Pacific Ocean' is simply a very thin layer of paintable caulk spread on by hand and then painted to match some recent colour photographs of Peleliu used to bill the island as a scuba diving destination.

I like how the table came out and we've had some really memorable game experiences on it. So how did the invasion turn out? You'll have to watch our video of the game or, better yet, come find me at a convention and play the game yourself! **WS&S**

With thanks my club members at Army Group York and especially Tony Marano - they endured a great deal of play testing and anything worthwhile came from their suggestions.