

Tracing Scars, Ghosts Of War

By MICHAEL DUNN, *Tampa Tribune*

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TEMPLE TERRACE - At 170 feet below the ocean surface, the world is cold and silent.

Though an experienced scuba diver, Patrick M. Finelli had never ventured so deep before.

Tropical fish flittered among the tanks, warships and fighter planes he saw jutting from the sand of Truk Lagoon.

Bubbles raced from his air hose as he explored the wreckage, an underwater graveyard haunted by the ghosts of Marines, Navy divers, Army gunners and countless others.

The battles of Truk, Peleliu and elsewhere in the southwest Pacific occurred 60 years ago, in the heat of World War II. They were ferocious fights. Bombs and bullets rained upon the islands like a hurricane.

Finelli, 55, traveled to the area in March. His goal: to walk in the footsteps of his father, Patrick L. Finelli, who was injured at the battle of Peleliu.

Peleliu today is a lush tropical island known for its diving and fishing. It is part of the Palau islands, roughly 600 miles east of the Philippines. It has a population of about 600.

But in September 1944, its soil was pockmarked with the scars of war.

"None of us can imagine what it was like for those Marines that invaded Peleliu," said Finelli, a University of South Florida professor who is writing a book about his father's wartime experience.

"I wanted to see it for myself: the beaches, the caves, the landing strip. The books tell you a lot, but they don't tell you what the limestone feels like under your feet; they don't tell what the jungle is like or how steep the hills are."

Finelli, who lives in Temple Terrace, hired a guide and spent a month exploring the islands. He recalls the boat ride that took him to Peleliu for the first time.

"I had a mixture of anticipation and apprehension," he said. "I was overcome with emotion and respect, and an amazing sense of, 'How did anyone survive this?'"

Bloody Battle

The battle of Peleliu raged from mid-September through late November 1944.

The 6-mile-long island is replete with interconnecting caves, which the Japanese fortified with concrete and filled with munitions and other equipment. They built camouflaged bunkers on the limestone cliffs, where they could easily attack U.S. forces.

Sept. 15 was D-Day for the assault forces, who had to slog across 800 yards of sharp coral to establish a beachhead. Temperatures on Peleliu rose as high as 115 degrees, soldiers reported, and drinking water was scarce. During a 73-day period, more than 12,000 men on both sides died.

“Peleliu was incredibly bloody,” Finelli said. “The Japanese were implementing a delay-and-bleed strategy: Slow them down, and take as many casualties as you can.”

American forces “had no idea how heavily fortified the island was. They thought it was going to be a cakewalk,” he said. “They fought hard, we fought hard. It was a matter of who was going to survive.”

Finelli's father, now 79 and living in Sudbury, Mass., was a young sergeant in the 1st Marine Division. A demolitions expert, he swam with a Navy underwater demolition team (UDT-6) to clear the beaches for invasion.

Debris Of War

He also was assigned perilous duty “cleaning out” the caves along Umurbrogol Mountain - dubbed Bloody Nose Ridge - by climbing the cliffs and dropping hand-held charges into them.

He recounted his story in an essay titled “Debris of War: A Personal Narrative”:

“It was dangerous duty. . . . I concentrated on the difficult task, with limited rifle support, when someone suddenly shouted, ‘Here they come!’

“I turned around to see Japanese soldiers on top of us. It was close quarters, fierce rifle fighting, finally ending in hand-to-hand combat. We got the best of them, but a Japanese bayonet seriously wounded me. I was 19 years old with the three stripes of a buck sergeant. I didn't think I would live to see my 20th birthday in September.”

He did survive, and was shipped to Guam, and later Hawaii, to recuperate. The following year, he was wounded again clearing mines in Yap.

Finelli said his father doesn't like talking about the experience. He felt he was simply doing his duty for his country. For his service, he was awarded a Bronze Star, Silver Star and Purple Heart.

The vestiges of war remain prominent throughout Micronesia today, Finelli said. Tanks, mortar rounds, assault vehicles and wrecked planes sully the landscape.

“A lot of war debris,” he said. “You never know what the tide will bring in.”

Not Your Average Dive

A skilled diver, Finelli dived among the planes, trucks, bulldozers, ships and torpedoes that remain underwater today. It is dangerous diving.

Finelli was awed by what he saw, he said. Among the twisted steel, he noticed a beautiful teacup and bowl, untouched by the fury that brought them there 60 years ago.

“The juxtaposition of these weapons of war with a fragile china bowl, mess kits, slippers, glasses, is sobering,” he said. “It was like visiting a memorial. Really, it's a grave. It was a very somber, moving experience.”

In his research, Finelli found parallels to America's war against terrorism, he said. The caves of Peleliu, for example, recall the caves of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

“There are other parallels,” he said. “You have a fanatical enemy, willing to die rather than surrender. I think there’s a parallel with the fanatical elements of the people we’re fighting.”

Finelli is home now, working on his book, swimming in his Spanish-tiled pool and contemplating the ghosts of a seaport 9,000 miles away.

“I think I’ve actually changed, being someone who grew up in the ‘60s and the Vietnam era,” he said. “I have such a tremendous respect for the sacrifices that were made. It took a tremendous effort to go from Pearl Harbor to victory in the Pacific. I really wanted to go there, to see it for myself.”

For more about Finelli’s trip and his father’s wartime experience, visit www.pfweb.com.