THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
Palauan Experiences of War and Reconstruction
1944 - 1951.

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Abstract

On 30 March 1944 the violence of World War Two reached the Palau Islands in the Western Carolines, when aircraft from US Navy Task Force 58 launched air strikes on Japanese installations in Koror, Angaur, Peleliu and Babeldaob. This thesis begins by asking what this attack meant for individual Palauans, and by examining how people reacted to the new world of war.

In their drive across the Central Pacific, American forces had already taken some of the Japanese Mandated Islands of Micronesia, including Kwajalein and Eniwetok in the Marshalls, and Saipan and Tinian in the Marianas. The air attack on Palau signalled the beginning of the end of Japanese administration in that group of islands. Until that time relations between Palauans and Japanese had been reasonable, even though Palauans were regarded as third class citizens. The war brought about a severe deterioration in this relationship as both groups fought for survival.

In September 1944, American troops seized Peleliu and Angaur, forcing a separation between the southern and northern islands of the Palauans. The different war experiences of the people remaining on Angaur through the battle for that island, and the other inhabitants of Palau who were evacuated to the "bypassed" island of Babeldaob in the north, are examined. This second group of Palauans shared the "big island", which was under constant American air attack for more than a year, with nearly 37,000 Japanese. The threat of air raids dominated the lives of Palauans, forcing them to take refuge in the jungle and in caves. The destruction caused by American bombing along with Japanese demands for food brought about a famine which was so severe that it pushed Palauans to a level of poverty previously unimaginable.

This work brings together Palauan oral history and wartime American archival records for the first time. It recreates Palauan experiences of war and postwar reconstruction and places the experiences of Islanders in a wider historical context. Evidence from interviews with Palauans who lived through this time is integrated with information from documents of American units operating in Palau, in particular the records of Marine Aircraft Group 11, which bombed Babeldaob and Koror and of the naval military government units which administered the islands.

This dual approach is continued throughout the thesis, following Palauans through the wartime occupation of Angaur, the ending of the war and the impact of the surrender. The end of the war brought Americans to northern Palau for the first time and forced the repatriation of the Japanese. Palau was a changed world. The "hell" of the war ended and for a time there was "heaven" on earth - peace, food, medicine and safety. After occupation the US Navy took over the control of the area until its transfer to the Department of the Interior in June 1951.

The thesis examines the impact of the Palauans' first vision of powerful and rich Americans and how it affected their relationships with Americans throughout the Navy's interim government of the area. This process is examined at the ground level in order to continue the "close-in" view of the experiences of individual Palauans, to understand what postwar reconstruction looked like and felt like to them, and how they responded to the changes brought about by the transition from Japanese to American administration.

The work follows a historical rather than anthropological approach in that it reconstructs the activities, feelings, and daily life of some Palauans during the war and postwar period and does not examine the impact of this period of change on traditional Palauan social structure.

The study of the experiences of Island people during World War Two is a recent field of inquiry. Most scholars have taken either an anthropological approach or have focussed on salvaging Islanders' recollections. This study differs in that it is less concerned with Palauans' representations of the war and postwar experience, and more interested in the experience as it was lived. It also demonstrates that 15 August 1945 was not the end of the war in terms of its impact on the lives of Palauans.