

A HERO OF THE BLOODY NOSE RIDGE: THE STORY OF PHARMACIST'S MATE THIRD CLASS JOE MARQUEZ AND THE FIGHT FOR PELELIU

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Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Eleuterio "Joe" Marquez, Hero of Peleliu and the first Mexican-American corpsmen to receive the Navy Cross (1945). (Photo courtesy of BUMED Historián)

On the morning of September 15, 1944, the 1st Marine Division began their assault on a tiny coral island in the Central Pacific called Peleliu. For Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Eleuterio "Joe" Marquez[1] this would be a baptism of fire.

The 19-year old Los Angeles native had enlisted a year earlier with his two best friends, each anxious to make their own contributions to the good fight. After a whirlwind of boot camp and hospital corps school in San Diego followed by field medical training at Camp Elliott, Marquez was now part of this deadly assault on the highly fortified island.

At only 13 square miles, Peleliu was far from the largest battlefield of the war, but it was deemed by strategists as vital for the execution of the Pacific campaign[2] and for ensuring success in the mission to retake the Philippines,

some 600 miles to the west.[3]

Peleliu would be hard-fought and bloody. Half of the men who landed in that first wave would become casualties—victims of artillery, mortar rounds, shrapnel, exploding coral fragments and cunning snipers. Corpsmen especially were prime targets for the latter. Within the first month of fighting, 59 of the 1st Marine Division's corpsmen were either killed in action or died from their wounds.[4]

For Marquez a sense of fear and helplessness welcomed him on D-Day. "The mortar and artillery that we were receiving was terrible. Later that day we received another heavy shelling with many . . . wounded and a few killed in action." [5]

Marquez helped to establish a battalion aid station where he would clean and dress wounds, administer plasma and evacuate casualties to the hospital ships offshore. Over the next three weeks he would serve on patrols along the north-south backbone of the island.

A significant challenge had been taking control of Umurbrogol Mountain, which the Marines had dubbed the "Bloody Nose Ridge." [6] On October 11th, Marquez and his unit ascended the ridge looking to quell pockets of fierce resistance operating from the honeycomb of caves, bunkers and underground positions.

It was in the early morning, Friday, October 13th, while his exhausted unit sought brief respite on the Bloody Nose Ridge that they came under attack. Shrapnel and pieces of coral tore through Marquez' legs. His pain was immediately overtaken by screams of "Corpsmen!" and a desire to go into action.

Despite severe wounds, Marquez dragged himself over the rough and difficult terrain to aid his comrades. [7]

He would later relate, "I began to crawl around to assess the damage to see who needed to be treated first. One of the corpsmen, named Ken [Blewitt],[8] was the most seriously wounded and I decided to give him a unit of plasma. I could not see his veins in the dark and asked the lieutenant if we could get a flare sent over to our area. His reply was, 'You're in charge, Doc!'



First wave of attack on Peleliu, September 15, 1944. The landing area is almost totally hidden in the dust and smoke. (Photo courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command)

With the light from the flare I was able to start the plasma. A Marine volunteered to watch the plasma so that I could take care of the other wounded. It was at this time I heard a voice say, 'I'm a corpsman. Can I help?'

I said 'yes' and continued working." [9]

At daybreak other corpsmen and stretcher bearers arrived on the scene offering some relief. Marquez professed that he and an unknown corpsman had attended to all the casualties. In that instance he was met by incredulous looks and a reply that sent shivers up his spine: "That's impossible. There could not have been another corpsmen helping. We are the closest unit and only just arrived on the scene." [10]

Marquez never discovered who that mysterious Samaritan was or if he had imagined hearing that kindly offer of assistance.

Despite his own injuries, Marquez refused treatment until all of his patients were evacuated.



Corpsmen attending to casualties on the coral beaches of Peleliu, September 15, 1944. (Photo courtesy of BUMED Historian)

When fighting on Peleliu finally ended in November 1944, over 11,000 Americans and Japanese had been killed including 1,300 U.S. Marines.[11] Ken Blewitt's own wounds proved fatal and he would not make it off the island alive.

For his actions, Marquez was awarded the Navy Cross in 1945, becoming the first Mexican-American hospital corpsmen to receive this honor.

After the war, Marquez would serve one more enlistment before leaving the Navy and working as a medical technologist in Southern California for over 30 years. He would marry a nurse and father two sons, including one who would follow in his footsteps by serving in the Navy.

Joe Marquez, that selfless hero of Peleliu, died in 2015 at the age of 90 and was laid to rest at Fort Rosencrans National Cemetery in Point Loma, Calif.

Today Peleliu is a state in the Republic of Palau. And since 1985 the entire island has held the designation as a U.S. National Historic Landmark. It is still covered in relics from that famous battle. And for those who visit the island, it is not hard to still feel the presence of those who lost their lives fighting and sacrificed themselves while saving others on that war-torn island so many years ago.



[1] Eleuterio Marquez was born in Los Angeles, Calif., in 1925. He took the name “Joe” early in his life. His parents were Mexican immigrants who fled the revolution in the early 1900s. Joe’s father had served as a silver miner in Nevada before suffering catastrophic injuries in a cave collapse that would leave him paralyzed. After his parents separated, Joe split his time growing up between L.A. and Tonopah, Nev. In high school, he would be elected his class president and become his school’s star basketball player. He would briefly work as a garage mechanic before enlisting in the Navy in 1943.

[2] Many historians would later question the strategic value of the island and assert that planner had underestimate the challenge the terrain would pose. Navy historian Samuel Eliot Morrison would remark, “There was nothing wrong in American planning for Peleliu except something exceedingly wrong—a woefully inadequate knowledge of the terrain. (Morrison, SE. *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II*, Volume 12, 1958).

[3] BUMED. U.S. Navy Medical Department Administrative History, 1941-1945. Volume 1, Chapter IX (Unpublished), 1946.

[4] *The History of the Medical Department of the United States Navy in World War II. A Compilation of the Killed, Wounded and Decorated Personnel*. Volume 2. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1953.

[5] Boardman, Robert. “Angels in Hells Annex: Navy Corpsmen Among Marines.” *Unforgettable Men in Unforgettable Times. Stories of Honor, Courage, Commitment and Faith from World War II*. Seattle, WA: Winepress Publications, 1998.

[6] McGaugh, Scott. *Battlefield Angels: Saving Lives under Enemy Fire from Valley Forge to Afghanistan*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2011.

[7] Marquez Navy Cross Citation. Retrieved from: <https://valor.militarytimes.com/hero/21352>

[8] Pharmacist's Mate Kenneth L. Blewitt, USN (1924-1944). Blewitt would posthumously be awarded the Silver Star for his actions on Peleliu. Official casualty record lists Blewitt's date of death as October 12th; Marquez would recall treating him in the early morning hours of October 13th.

[9] Boardman.

[10] Marquez, David. "In Memory of Eleutorio Joe Marquez, February 21, 1921-August 28, 2015." Digital Memorial. Retrieved from <http://obits.digitalmemory.com>

[11] *Medical Department Administrative History.*