

# The Battle of Wake Island: The Unsung Sequel to Pearl Harbor



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**Gen Robert B. Neller, Commandant of the Marine Corps, reads a plaque on the Prisoner of War rock on Wake Island, Aug. 7, during his tour of the island.**

By SSgt Mathew D. Springer, USMC

*Editor's note: The following article is the second-place winning entry of the Leatherneck Writing Contest. Major Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines, through the Marine Corps Association & Foundation. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature the third-place essay and honorable mention entrants.*

Objectively speaking, the Battle of Wake Island was nothing more than the struggle of a small group of Marines who fought a losing battle against the Empire of Japan in World War II. It is a story of defeat, compounded by

the notoriety of being the first surrender following direct combat by any Marine unit in Corps history. It is a battle preceded by miscalculations, hubris and unpreparedness. It is a story of abandonment, suffering and loss at the hands of Japanese captors. It's little wonder that Wake Island is not often held to the flame of historical lore of the Corps in the same manner as Okinawa, Tarawa, Peleliu or Iwo Jima.

Upon close study, however, Wake Island is more than a simple pessimistic account of an insignificant battle. On the contrary, Wake Island was a declarative statement to the Japanese military that highlighted the fighting spirit of the Marine Corps. In defeat, the Marines of Wake Island delivered Japan a pyrrhic victory, ignited the morale of American warfighters,

touched the hearts of the American people and set the tone for the rest of Japan's war with the United States.

On Aug. 19, 1941, the 517 Marines and Sailors of 1st Defense Landing Battalion arrived as the first American forces fortifying the island of Wake. Under the command of Major James Devereux and Navy Commander Winfield S. Cunningham, the Marines reluctantly worked 10 to 12 hours a day clearing fields of fire, emplacing sandbags, conducting reactionary drills and completing other defensive measures.

Hailing from a lineage of military scholars, Maj Devereux was one of the only men with the foresight to sense the impending danger. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, most Marines believed that



This photo shows the Pan American Airways compound on Wake Island on March 5, 1940. The base included a pier for seaplanes and was the site of heavy fighting in December 1941.



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the Japanese would never dare to incite a war with the United States. To them, Wake Island represented nothing more than an unfortunate rotation to an unimportant strip of land.

Wake Island was never fully equipped for defense against a full-scale invasion. Following the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the Marines found themselves in a race against time to prepare for the now-evident incursion by enemy forces. The island defenders' arsenal included 12 M3 anti-air cannons, several Browning .50-caliber machine guns, and a handful of lightweight artillery guns. The riflemen were armed with the reliable M1903 Springfield bolt-action rifle. The fighter squadron boasted only 12 functional F4F-3 Wildcat fighters; not ideal numbers to deter the forces that crippled Pearl Harbor, but enough to give the Marines and Sailors an even battlefield for a short amount of time. With no subsequent reinforcements, however, the Marines found themselves lacking fundamental defensive components such as radar, mines and illumination rounds.

The 1st Defense Landing Bn was not arbitrarily neglected by their naval leadership. Admiral Husband Kimmel,

commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, wanted to reinforce Wake prior to Pearl Harbor's disaster. Believing that any act of aggression from the Japanese would initially target Wake, he proactively dispatched a battle group led by the carrier USS *Saratoga* (CV-3). Carrying additional troops, radar and



ADM Husband Kimmel

civilian evacuation plans, *Saratoga* was meant to be Kimmel's counterattack. The United States desperately needed to regain hegemony after having her nose bloodied by an enemy for which many Americans previously held little to no respect.

Tragically, ADM Kimmel's plan would never come to fruition. Ten days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Kimmel and his Army garrison counterpart were relieved of their commands for allowing such an event to transpire. Arguably sacrificed as scapegoats to satisfy American anger and humiliation, the loss of ADM Kimmel meant the loss of the foremost naval leader committed to Wake Island's defense in the most crucial of times.

As the opposing navies raced to Wake, the defending Marines and Sailors continued fortifying the island. Lacking early warning radar, aviation Marines took their Wildcats to the skies in an attempt to stave off any aerial incursions. Unfortunately, it was not enough. On Dec. 9, Japanese bombers descended on Wake in such great numbers that the pilots could do nothing but watch as the bombardment began. In the initial bombings, the Japanese destroyed eight of the Marines' 12 grounded fighter planes, as well as any



**Embarking Marines at Pearl Harbor, prior to sailing for Wake in an attempt to relieve the island on Dec. 15, 1941. (Photo courtesy of National Archives)**



major exposed structures. To the ground troops, the damage was of little strategic value. The aviation Marines, however, lost 23 personnel, as well as the ability to mount any significant contention for air superiority if a carrier arrived.

Empowered by overwhelming success at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese became overzealous. The Imperial Navy soon found itself spread thin attempting to take the islands of Guam, Midway, Marshall, Malaya and Wake in one rapid motion. Acting on intelligence that island defenses had been reduced to entrenched small arms, appointed leader ADM Sadamichi Kajioka ordered nine ships—cruisers and destroyers—to seize the island.

In actuality, the weakness displayed by the island defenders was a ploy to lure the Japanese into a miscalculated initial invasion. Maj Devereux planned to repel the initial attack by erecting fake gun positions in the open, leaving the real batteries concealed for an ambush. As

the imperial fleet drew close to release transport vessels carrying 450 landing troops, the artillerymen opened fire from hidden positions lining the coast. Catching the hapless fleet completely by surprise, they instantly sunk a destroyer while simultaneously damaging the other eight ships. The panicked ships individually retreated, condemning the invading troops to suffer 100 percent casualties with no naval support. Capitalizing on the gained advantage, Marine aviators incessantly strafed the fleeing ships until expending all available ordnance. Captain Henry Elrod earned the title “Hammering Hank” by singlehandedly sinking a second fleeing destroyer due to his persistent efforts in attacking the fleet as they fled. The explosion of ignited torpedoes from the second sank destroyer over the night horizon was an emphatic coda to the first engagement of the battle.

Wake Island’s defenders earned the ire of the entire Imperial Navy. ADM



**Capt Henry Elrod**

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**Above: Col Walter L.J. Bayler, “the last man off Wake Island” in December 1941, was the first American servicemember to set foot on Wake Island in January 1945 after the surrender documents were signed. (USMC photo)**



**VADM William S. Pye**

Kajioka rapidly responded to the empire’s first loss with intentions of regaining the momentum. His decision to send a fleet lacking carriers was professionally embarrassing and resulted in unnecessary loss of lives—a mistake he would not repeat. Japanese bombers attacked the island day after day until, on Dec. 23, a 42-ship armada appeared on Wake’s horizon. Out of range of Marine artillery and backed by two carriers full of fighters, the island defenders knew the second invasion would not go as well as the first.

The Japanese attempted to begin the second invasion with a low-light beach landing. Upon indication that enemy forces came ashore, the Marines utilized their four industrial-strength spotlights from the airfield. Despite being immediately targeted and destroyed by enemy fire,

the spotlights illuminated enemy landing zones while they were most vulnerable. Cannons and machine-gun fire ripped into the invading forces’ ranks and once again inflicted heavy Japanese casualties. Try as they might, the Marines could not inflict 100 percent casualties a second time on such a massive force. Weathering their casualties, the Japanese slowly gained footholds throughout the island. By morning, both forces were engaged in a vicious land battle on even footing.

In the skies above, Marine aviators showed unshakable courage against their foes. Despite being outnumbered four to one, they took to the skies one last time to defend against the otherwise unchallenged aerial attack. Captain Herbert Freuler, the senior pilot flying, was the last airborne American after all his wingmen were



shot down in ensuing dogfights. Despite wounds suffered from repeated grazings, he continued to fire upon enemies and famously downed the bombardier credited with sinking USS *Arizona* (BB-39) at Pearl Harbor.

As the battle continued late into the second day, CDR Cunningham ominously reported to his superiors “enemy on island—issue in doubt.” If Cunningham hoped the severity of his message would encourage the relief force to arrive sooner, his plan backfired. Upon hearing this simple yet telling message, Vice Admiral William S. Pye (ADM Kimmel’s successor) ordered the *Saratoga* battlegroup to return to Pearl Harbor, citing unnecessary loss as his chief motivation for no longer reinforcing the ill-fated troops.

The Wake defenders continued resisting the ever-growing invasion force as fighting intensified. The Marines found themselves constantly relying upon final protective fire to survive each subsequent wave of Japanese forces, each time engaging larger forces with fewer resources. Casualties, ammo depletion and fatigue began to compound, but this inspired Marine leaders in the trenches to become bolder.

“Hammering Hank” Elrod, who previously sunk a destroyer and downed multiple enemy aircraft, proved that if every Marine is a rifleman, then every Marine officer can be a rifle platoon commander. He and other Marine leaders began employing aggressive counter-offenses to keep Japanese off-balanced and seize ammunition. During one of his many counter-offenses, he was struck by enemy crossfire while lobbing a grenade and was mortally wounded. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. As Marines scrambled to prepare for a third day of fighting, many believed victory was still feasible, and the relief effort would assuredly arrive.

Inside the command center, Maj Devereux lost communications with his Marines, severing his ability to provide command and control during the desperate situation. Almost simultaneously, CDR Cunningham was informed by Pearl Harbor that the relief force would not be coming. Stepping outside the bunker, the commander saw that every fighting position within visual range had Japanese battle standards flying where his Marines were previously stationed. Believing every position within sight overrun and lacking communication with distant units, Cunningham concluded that further resistance was futile and surrendered the island to the Japanese.

To their dismay, CDR Cunningham and Maj Devereux found that although the Marines sustained significant casualties,



**LtCol James P. Devereux, arriving in Honolulu, Sept. 20, 1945, on his way home following his release from a Japanese prisoner of war camp.**

the island was far from lost. Of the original 517 servicemen, 476 were still alive, as were the majority of the civilian contractors. The Japanese standards that the leadership had seen were actually yosegaki flags; standards flown from a bayonet or rifle carried by unit leaders for command and signal procedures. These flags dated back to the Samurai heritage. In a twist of irony, the flags that convinced CDR Cunningham of his troops’ defeat were likely proof of dead Japanese troops surrounding triumphant Marine emplacements.

Despite the negative connotation that surrender carries in Marine Corps culture, CDR Cunningham’s decision likely led to the safe return of his Marines, his Sailors, and hundreds of civilian contractors under his charge following the war. Furthermore, war bonds skyrocketed outside movie theaters where the Hollywood depiction took creative liberty with the truth of what happened—to include the idea that all Americans on the island fought to the death, never to surrender.

The Marines and Sailors who fought in the defense of the island demonstrated tenacity that set the standard for all Marines to follow. Wake Island is neither a story of dishonor nor a blemish on the history of our Corps. It is an account of Marines fighting tooth and nail against insurmountable odds for a tiny American island, refusing to go quietly into the night. For that, it deserves to be remembered in the annals of Marine history.

*Author’s bio: SSgt Mathew Springer enlisted in 2010 as an infantry Marine and later completed a lateral move to become a Chinese Cryptologic Linguist. He earned an associate’s degree in Mandarin Chinese language and culture from the Defense Language Institute. He recently deployed to Iraq with SPMAGTF-Crisis Response-CENTCOM 17.2. He currently serves as the Platoon Sergeant of Collections Platoon, “Bravo” Company, 1st Radio Bn, I MEF aboard Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif. 🇺🇸*