

The Mariana Islands and World War II~ part two

Battle for Wake Island ~ 2nd Battle for Guam

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Wake Island

the Alamo of The Pacific 8 December 1941

Mention WW II in the Pacific and many folks immediately think of Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, Midway, Coral Sea, Hiroshima or maybe the movie 'South Pacific'. Wake Island will scarcely gain any mention. Yet it was the scene of the first substantial American resistance to the Japanese following the disaster at Pearl Harbor. Wake Island got the name *The Alamo of The Pacific* because the American defenders, like the defenders at the Alamo, held out for 18 days (five days longer than the Alamo) heavily outnumbered and outgunned. They gave hope to both the American people and the military stunned by the defeats at Pearl Harbor and Guam and the bad news coming from the Philippines.

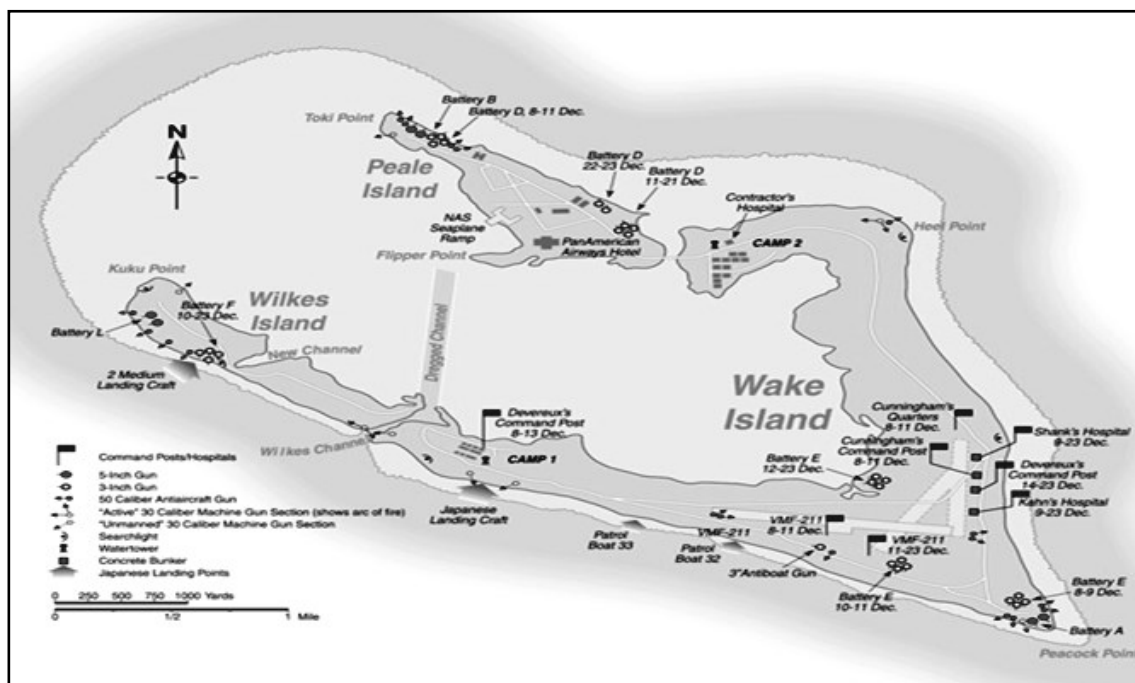
As a result of the Spanish American War, the US 'inherited' a string of islands throughout the Pacific. They served as military bases and coaling stations and later refueling stations for the Navy's ships. They were also building submarine bases there prior to the outbreak of the war. When the war began the Japanese captured as many of these islands as they could. Thus, depriving the US of airbases from which they could bomb Japan. Although it was one of the most isolated islands in the Pacific it too was invaded.

Defending Wake was a garrison of 449 Marines, several dozen Navy personnel, and a handful of Army radio operators. There were approximately 1,100 construction workers and forty-five Guamanian men, employed by Pan American Airways as part of its transpacific Clipper service. This small garrison was nearly

2,100 fewer troops than American prewar strategists had deemed necessary to properly defend the atoll. Why the reinforcements were never sent has never been sufficiently explained. The island's defenders were equipped with six 5-inch (127-mm) coastal artillery pieces, 12 3-inch (76-mm) anti-aircraft guns, 12 F4F Wildcat fighter planes, and an assortment of machine guns and small arms.

The saga of the battle for Wake began about noon on the same day as the attack on Pearl Harbor. (Wake is about 2,000 miles west of Hawaii but is on the other side of the International Dateline. Hence the official starting date of the battle was 8 December). Even though the defenders had heard the reports of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the defenders were surprised by 36 Japanese bombers swarmed over the Island. The Japanese caught the bulk of the island's fighter squadron on the ground and destroyed eight Wildcats as well as killing or wounding nearly two-thirds of the aviation personnel. Wake was bombed on an almost daily basis for the next two weeks.

Three days later a Japanese naval task force attempted to land 450 Special Naval Landing Force troops on Wake's south shore. The Island defenders let them close to 4,500 yards before their 5-inch naval guns opened fire and the four remaining fighters put up a stout defense. Two of the six Japanese destroyers were sunk, the light cruiser and two armed merchantmen sustained damage, and the transports were withdrawn. That small engagement was the first tactical defeat experienced by the Japanese navy in WW II. It electrified the American people, dispelling much of the





American's halting the Japanese Invasion

gloom caused by Pearl Harbor and the disaster in Guam.

For the next eleven days Japanese bombers continued their harassment of the defenders. The naval command considered sending a relief task force to the island, but canceled the plans when it learned there might have been two Japanese carriers in the area. Failing to take advantage of the lull in the fighting, the US essentially abandoned the defenders to a brutal and atrocious fate at the hands of the Japanese army.

At 0235 on 23 December, 900 Japanese soldiers of the Special Naval Landing Force stormed ashore. Soon a desperate battle was being fought across the atoll between groups of men fighting with rifles, bayonets, grenades and fists. The Americans fought hard, but as more Japanese landed the defenders were pushed toward the island's center. By dawn, the American flag still flew from a battered water tower, the highest point on Wake, but Japanese flags fluttered everywhere else. Reports from the three islands were discouraging; there were simply too many Japanese and too few Americans. The commanding officer radioed Pearl Harbor:



Hand drawn picture of Japanese fighting Americans

"Enemy on island. Issue in doubt." There were no further messages.

The Japanese paid a heavy price for their victory. The fight for Wake had cost them two destroyers and one submarine sunk and several hundred soldiers killed or wounded. Of the 449 defenders, eighty-one Marines, eight sailors and 82 civilian construction workers had been killed or wounded during the battle, the rest became Prisoners.

Enraged by their losses, in a sad foreboding of what

captured Allied personnel were to experience throughout the Pacific theater, the Japanese treated their prisoners, both military and civilian, brutally. The new POWs were forced to sit naked on the airfield for two days. On the second day they were given spoiled food and water. Then most were herded on to the merchant ship *Nitta Maru* and sent to slave labor in Japan and China. 380 captured Americans were held on the island to rebuild the defenses.

To retake Wake, air strikes were ordered on the Japanese fortifications. The island was subjected to periodic arial bombing during the war. Future President George H. W. Bush also flew his first combat mission as a naval aviator over the Island. After this, Wake was occasionally raided but never attacked en-masse. The raids caused additional ships damaged, 21 aircraft shot down and almost 1,000 men killed. The strikes by the U.S. Navy task force damaged 12 cargo ships, 21 aircraft shot down and killed almost 1,000 Japanese soldiers. The American POWs on Wake would slave away until 5 October 1943, when American navy aircraft from the carrier *USS Lexington* bombed the island.

Two days later, fearing an imminent invasion, Japanese Rear Admiral Shigematsu Sakaibara ordered the execution of the 98 captive American civilian workers who had initially been kept to perform forced labor. They were taken to the northern end of the island, blindfolded and executed with a machine gun. One of the prisoners (whose name has never been discovered) escaped, apparently returning to the site to carve the message "98 US PW 5-10-43" on a large coral rock near where the victims had been hastily buried in a



The inscription on the rock can still be seen and is a Wake Island landmark

mass grave. The unknown American was recaptured, and personally beheaded by Rear Admiral Sakaibara.

Upon receiving word that the Japanese surrender was imminent the bodies of the murdered captives were exhumed and reburied in a US cemetery at Peacock Point.

The Japanese garrison on the island surrendered to a detachment of Marines on 4 September 1945, two days following the official surrender aboard the *USS Missouri*.

The Second Battle of Guam

The island of Guam in the Marianas Island chain had been a protectorate of the United States since the Spanish American war and is now a part of the US Commonwealth. It had been under Japanese control since 1941. US military planners had been considering retaking Guam because of the harbor at Apra. It is considered one of the best natural ports in the Pacific and would be a main feature in the military's effort to win the war - the Navy's floating forward repair bases. The island also afforded an area large enough to build air bases for Boeing B-29 "Superfortresses" to bomb Japan and B-24 "Liberators" could also bomb Iwo Jima and the Bonin Islands.

The invasion to retake Guam had been delayed by the invasion of Saipan and the following Battle of the Philippine Sea. It was greatly aided by the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot" which virtually wiped-out Japan's naval air support, leaving Guam essentially without aircover. The invasion finally began with a "softening up campaign" on 11 June 1944 with aerial bombardments consisting of 216 carrier based aircraft supported by land based B-24 Liberator bombers from the Marshall Islands. The bombing lasted until 13 June and was successful in sinking 12 Japanese cargo vessels, effectively isolating the 18,000

Japanese defenders on Guam from resupply. On 27 June several US Navy battleships and cruisers began shelling potential landing areas. They were joined by an aircraft carrier group on 4 July.

The final plan called for a two-pronged attack on the western shore on each side of the Orote peninsula and Apra Bay. The 3rd Marine Division would land to the north, near the city of Agana, while the 1st Marine Provisional Brigade landed to the south, near the town of Agat. The two forces would meet around the back of the peninsula, thus cutting off the bay before clearing the rest of the island.

Underwater demolition teams began to remove sunken obstacles at the landing beach sites from 14-17 July. They left a sign for the first assault wave at Asan: "Welcome Marines -- USO This Way." The landing sites were on both sides of the Orote peninsula to secure Apra harbor. At 0828 the invasion began and

59,000 Americans began to storm ashore. Japanese resistance was heavy and initially sank 20 LVT's (Landing Vehicles Tracked, capable of carrying both soldiers and small vehicles like jeeps with mounted machine guns.) Because Guam is surrounded by coral reefs, few of the LVT's could reach the shore. The Marines and soldiers had to wade through the water to reach their landing zones. Although casualties were heavy, the Marines were able to establish a beachhead and by 0900 enough personnel and equipment were landed to establish a beachhead 6,000 feet inland.

Throughout the first night the Japanese counter attacked but were driven back. The attacks against the American beaches had strained the Japanese. At the start of August, they were running out of food and ammunition and had only a few tanks left. They retreated

to the mountainous part of the island. Although the Japanese were short of supplies and ammunition they refused to surrender.

The Japanese commander committed suicide on 11 August. Many Japanese troops surrendered, those that didn't, committed suicide. In the fighting for Guam, American forces suffered 1,783 killed and 6,010 wounded while Japanese losses numbered approximately 18,337 killed and 1,250 captured. In the weeks after the battle, engineers transformed Guam

into a major Allied base that included five airfields. From these bases, B-29 bombers flew out to attack targets in the Western Pacific and on mainland Japan.

Three Japanese soldiers refused to surrender and hid in the jungle. One of them, Sergeant Shoichi Yokoi was discovered by two local men checking their shrimp pots on 24 January 1972. He had lived alone in a cave for 27 years. He was repatriated to Japan and given a hero's welcome.

July 21st is Liberation Day on Guam and is a national holiday.

