

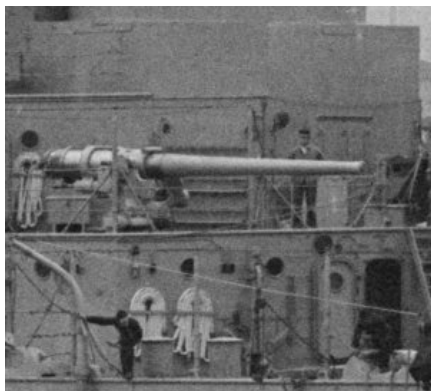
Battle of Wake Island

The **Battle of Wake Island** began simultaneously with the Attack on Pearl Harbor and ended on 23 December 1941, with the surrender of the American forces to the Empire of Japan. It was fought on and around the atoll formed by Wake Island and its islets of Peale and Wilkes Islands by the air, land and naval forces of the Empire of Japan against those of the U.S., with Marines playing a prominent role on both sides.

The island was held by the Japanese until September 4, 1945, when the remaining Japanese garrison surrendered to a detachment of United States Marines.

Prelude

The United States Navy constructed a military base on the atoll. On 19 August, the first permanent military garrison, understrength elements of the 1st Marine Defense Battalion,^[1] totaling 450 officers and men,^[2] were stationed on the island, under Major James P.S. Devereux. Also present on the island were 68 U.S. Navy personnel and about 1,221 civilian workers for the Morrison-Knudsen Company.



5"/51 caliber gun on *Texas* 1914.

The Marines were armed with six 5 in (130 mm)/51 cal shore batteries, removed from a scrapped battleship; twelve 3 in (76 mm)/50 cal anti-aircraft guns (with only a single working anti-aircraft director among them); eighteen .50 in (12.7 mm) Browning heavy machine guns; and thirty .30 in (7.62 mm) heavy, medium and light water- and air-cooled machine guns of various manufacture and operating condition.

On 28 November, U.S. Navy Commander Winfield S. Cunningham reported to Wake to assume overall command of U.S. forces on the island. He had only 10 days to examine defenses and assess his men before war began.



3"/50 caliber gun aboard *Slater*

On 8 December, just hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor (Wake being on the opposite side of the International Date Line), 36^[3] Japanese Mitsubishi G3M3 bombers flown from bases on the Marshall Islands attacked Wake Island, destroying 8 of the 12 F4F-3 Wildcat fighter aircraft belonging to Marine Corps fighter squadron VMF-211 on the ground. The remaining four wildcats were in the air patrolling, but because of poor visibility failed to see the attacking Japanese bombers. These Wildcats did down two bombers on the following day, however.^[4] All of the Marine garrison's defensive emplacements were left intact by the raid, which primarily targeted the naval aircraft. Of 55 Marine aviation personnel, 23 were killed and 11 were wounded. Ten

Chamorro civilian employees of Pan American Airways were also killed.^[5]

First landing attempt

Early on the morning of 11 December, the garrison, with the support of the four remaining Wildcats, repelled the first Japanese landing attempt by the South Seas Force, which included the light cruisers *Yubari*, *Tenryū*, and *Tatsuta*; the destroyers *Yayoi*, *Mutsuki*, *Kisaragi*, *Hayate*, *Oite*, and *Asanagi*; two *Momi*-class destroyers converted to patrol boats (*Patrol Boat No. 32* and *Patrol Boat No. 33*), and two troop transport ships containing 450 Special Naval Landing Force troops.

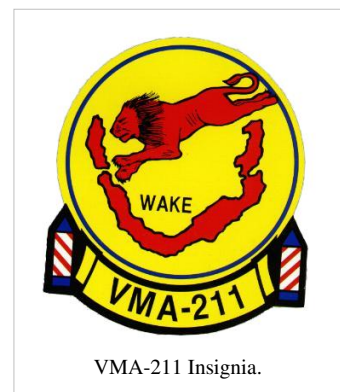
The U.S. Marines fired at the invasion fleet with their six 5 in (130 mm) coastal artillery guns. Major Devereux, the Marine commander under Cunningham, ordered the gunners to hold their fire until the enemy moved within range of the coastal defenses. "Battery L", on Peale islet, succeeded in sinking *Hayate* at a distance of 4000 yd (3700 m) with at least two direct hits to her magazines, causing her to explode and sink within two minutes, in full view of the defenders on shore. *Yubari*'s superstructure was hit 11 times. The four Wildcats also succeeded in sinking another destroyer, *Kisaragi*, by dropping a bomb on her stern where the depth charges were stored. Both Japanese destroyers were lost with all hands, with *Hayate* becoming the first Japanese surface warship to be sunk during World War II. The Japanese force withdrew before landing. This was the first Japanese defeat of the war.

After the initial raid was fought off, American news media reported that, when queried about reinforcement and resupply, Cunningham was reported to have quipped "Send us more Japs!" In fact, Commander Cunningham sent a long list of critical equipment—including gunsights, spare parts, and fire-control radar—to his immediate superior: Commandant, 14th Naval District. It is believed that the quip was actually padding (a technique of adding nonsense text to a message to make cryptanalysis more difficult).^[5]

But the continuing siege and frequent Japanese air attacks on the Wake garrison continued, without resupply for the Americans. The initial resistance offered by the garrison prompted the Japanese Navy to detach two aircraft carriers (*Sōryū* and *Hiryū*) from the force that attacked Pearl Harbor to support the second landing attempt.

USN relief attempt

The projected U.S. relief attempt by Admiral Frank Fletcher's Task Force 11 (TF 11) and supported Admiral Wilson Brown's TF 14 consisted of the fleet carrier *Saratoga*, the fleet oiler *Neches*, the seaplane tender *Tangier*, the heavy cruisers *Astoria*, *Minneapolis*, and *San Francisco*, and 10 destroyers. The convoy carried the 4th Marine Defense Battalion, the VMF-221 fighter squadron equipped with Brewster F2A-3 Buffalo fighters, along with 9,000 5 in (130 mm) rounds, 12,000 3 in (76 mm) rounds, and 3,000,000 .50 in (12.7 mm) rounds, as well as a large amount of ammunition for mortars and other battalion small arms. TF 14—with the fleet carrier *Lexington*, three heavy cruisers, eight destroyers, and an oiler—was to undertake a raid on the Marshall Islands to divert Japanese attention.



At 21:00 on 22 December, after receiving information indicating the presence of two IJN carriers and two fast battleships near Wake Island Vice Admiral William S. Pye—the Acting Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet—ordered TF 14 to return to Pearl Harbor for fear of losses.^[6]

Second assault

The second Japanese invasion force came on 23 December, composed mostly of the same ships from the first attempt with some new additions, plus 1,500 Japanese marines. The landings began at 02:35 where, after a preliminary bombardment, the ex-destroyers *Patrol Boat No. 32* and *Patrol Boat No. 33* were beached and burned in their attempts to land the invasion force. After a full night and morning of fighting, the Wake garrison surrendered to the Japanese by mid-afternoon.

The U.S. Marines lost 47 killed and 2 MIA during the entire 15-day siege, while three U.S. Navy personnel and at least 10 U.S. civilians were killed, 10 Chamorros civilians killed, and 12 civilians wounded. Japanese losses were recorded at between 700 to 900 killed, with at least 300 more wounded,^[7] in addition to the two destroyers lost in the first invasion attempt and at least 28 land-based and carrier aircraft either shot down or damaged. The Japanese captured all men remaining on the island, the majority of whom were civilian contractors employed with Morrison-Knudsen Company.

Captain Henry T. Elrod, one of the pilots from VMF-211, was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for his action on the island during the second landing attempt, having shot down two Japanese A6M2 Zeros, and sunk the Japanese destroyer *Kisaragi*. A special military decoration, the Wake Island Device, was created to honor those who had fought in the defense of the island.



Captain Henry T. Elrod, KIA, Medal of Honor recipient



Wreckage of Wildcat 211-F-11, flown by Captain Henry T. Elrod on December 11 in the attack that sank the Japanese destroyer *Kisaragi*.
{211 for "Squadron 211"; F for "Fighter"; 11 for 11th plane}



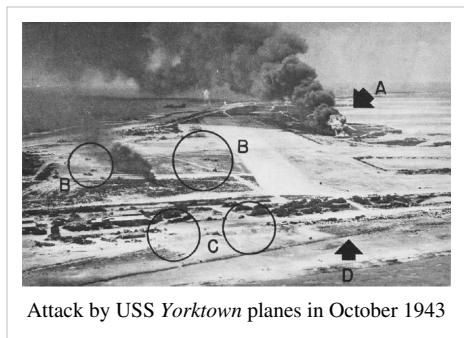
Japanese *Patrol Boat No. 32* (left) and *Patrol Boat No. 33*



Wake Island Device

Japanese occupation

Fearing an imminent invasion, the Japanese reinforced Wake Island with more formidable defenses. The American captives were ordered to build a series of bunkers and fortifications on Wake. The Japanese brought in an 8 in (200 mm) naval artillery gun that they had captured in Singapore. The U.S. Navy established a submarine blockade instead of an amphibious invasion on Wake Island. As a result, the Japanese garrison starved. On 24 February 1942, aircraft from the carrier *Enterprise* attacked the Japanese garrison on Wake Island. U.S. forces bombed the island periodically from 1942 until Japan's surrender in 1945. On 24 July 1943, B-24 Liberators lead by Lt. Jesse Stay of the 42nd Squadron (11th Bombardment Group) of the Army Air Corps in transit from Midway Island struck the Japanese garrison on Wake Island. At least 2 men from that raid were awarded Distinguished Flying Crosses for their efforts.^[8] George H. W. Bush also conducted his first mission as an aviator over Wake Island. After this, Wake was occasionally raided but never attacked *en masse*.



Attack by USS Yorktown planes in October 1943

War crimes

On 5 October 1943, American naval aircraft from *Yorktown* raided Wake. Two days later, fearing an imminent invasion, Rear Admiral Shigematsu Sakaibara ordered the execution of the 98 captured American civilian workers remaining on the island, 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 the massacre, 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



The 98 rock

buried in a mass grave. The unknown American was recaptured, and Sakaibara personally beheaded him with a *katana*. The inscription on the rock can still be seen and is a Wake Island landmark.

On 4 September 1945, the remaining Japanese garrison surrendered to a detachment of U.S. Marines. The handover of Wake was officially conducted in a brief ceremony aboard *Levy*. After the war, Sakaibara and his subordinate—Lieutenant-Commander Tachibana—were sentenced to death for the massacre and other war crimes. Several Japanese officers in American custody had committed suicide over the incident, leaving written statements that incriminated Sakaibara. Admiral Sakaibara was hanged on June 18, 1947.^[9] Eventually, Tachibana's sentence was commuted to life in prison. The murdered civilian POWs were reburied after the war in Honolulu's National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, commonly known as Punchbowl Crater.

Escapee

William L Taylor, like many of the Wake island POWs, was relocated to China for forced labor for the Japanese army. In 1945 he was traveling on a Japanese train as work detail from Shanghai when he escaped with Jack Hernandez by jumping off the train when Japanese guards were not looking. Hernandez broke his leg and was forced to stay as Taylor continued his journey. Down the line, Taylor reluctantly met up with Chinese Communist soldiers who he quoted as saying "You're OK now, we are friends with the Americans." After 10 weeks of traveling with the Chinese Communists in northern China he was able to contact American military forces who called for a plane to pick him up and bring him to an American base in northern China. Before he left China he met Mao Zedong who gave him a gift of Chinese rugs and told him he was the only POW who had successfully come through north China. In an interview with the History Channel during the segment "Wake Island: The Alamo of the Pacific" he claims that Mao "saved his life".

Portrayal in Popular Culture

The Paramount studio began work on a movie even before the real life Battle for Wake Island was over. The resulting 1942 film, directed by John Farrow, tacks unrelated romantic subplots onto a straightforward re-telling of the battle. The film contains numerous factual errors, leaving viewers with the impression that the island's defenders fought to the last man; that the island's naval commander was killed in a bombing raid (he survived); and that the Island defense was in the hands of USMC officers. However, the film succeeded in its primary propaganda purpose of creating a stirring patriotic film. *Wake Island* was nominated for four Academy Awards, including best picture. Farrow won the 1942 New York Film Critics Circle Award for best director. The film was re-released on DVD by MCA Home Video in 2004.

The Tom and Jerry cartoon *The Yankee Doodle Mouse* message at the end to "Send More Cats" is a spoof of the last message "Send More Japs".

In *Pulp Fiction*, directed by Quentin Tarantino, during the second story "The Gold Watch", Christopher Walken plays Capt. Koons, a fictional character that is set free from a POW camp in Vietnam with a family heirloom for one of the characters whose grandfather was a marine killed during the battle of Wake Island^[]

The 2002 PC game *Battlefield 1942* features Wake Island as a playable battlefield. The level was especially popular among the game's players, and hence was remade several times as a *Battlefield Vietnam*, *Battlefield 2*, *Battlefield 2142* and *Battlefield 1943* map, and is set to be included in *Battlefield 3* as a feature of the *Back to Karkand* downloadable content.

A 2003 television documentary, *Wake Island: Alamo of the Pacific*, included interviews with both U.S. Marines and Japanese sailors who took part in the fighting. The film received a 2004 Emmy nomination for music and sound.

Gallery



Admiral Kajioka's flagship, the cruiser *Yubari*



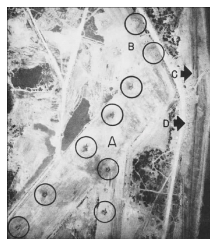
Japanese destroyer *Hayate*, sunk at Wake



Japanese destroyer *Kisaragi*, sunk at Wake



Japanese Artillery on Wake



Wake Island attacked in 1943



The formal surrender of the Japanese garrison on Wake Island - September 7, 1945. Shigematsu Sakaibara is the officer in the right-foreground.



Shigematsu Sakaibara signing the surrender of Wake Island Aboard USS *Levy*—September 4, 1945.



U.S. Civilian POWs Memorial

Notes

- [1] 1st Marine Defense Battalion (<http://www.nps.gov/wapa/indepth/extContent/usmc/pcn-190-003133-00/sec15.htm>)
- [2] Only 449 marines were on hand for the battles at Wake Island because one officer [Major Walter Baylor] had been ordered to leave on 20 December with official reports.
- [3] (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9075899/Battle-of-Wake-Island>)
- [4] http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_wake_island.html
- [5] Robert J. Cressman, *A Magnificent Fight: Marines in the Defense of Wake Island*, World War II Commemorative Series, ed. Benis M. Frank (Marine Corps Historical Center: Washington, D.C.:1998). Electronic version - accessed 6-10-2006 (<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-C-Wake.html>)
- [6] Lundstrom, John B. *The First Team: Pacific Naval Air Combat from Pearl Harbor to Midway*. Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1990. ISBN 1-59114-471-X.
- [7] United States and Japanese Casualties (<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/Wake/USMC-M-Wake-III.html>)
- [8] Searce, Phil; "Finish Forty and Home", pgs 113-114.
- [9] Hubbs, Mark E.. "Massacre on Wake Island" (<http://www.yorktownsailor.com/yorktown/massacre.html>). . Retrieved 2008-10-31.

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- Captain Koons (<http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0001784/>) at the Internet Movie Database

Further Reading

- Moran, Jim (2011). *Wake Island 1941; A battle to make the gods weep*. Osprey Campaign Series #144; Osprey Publishing. Illustrator: Peter Dennis. ISBN 978-1-84908-603-5

External links

- The Defense of Wake (<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-M-Wake.html>)
- A Magnificent Fight: Marines in the Battle for Wake Island (<http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USMC/USMC-C-Wake.html>)
- USS Wake Island CVE-65 History (http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/w1/wake_island.htm)
- Wake Island USMC POW died 1944 (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=sh&GRid=5191847&>)
- Wake Island Marine at Find A Grave (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=3404299&FLid=28148096&>)
- Wake Island Account (<http://www.historynet.com/wake-island-prisoners-of-world-war-ii.htm>)
- Account of the killed Civilians (<http://www.yorktownsailor.com/yorktown/massacre.html>)
- account of the Killed Civilians (<http://www.executedtoday.com/2008/10/07/1943-98-american-civilian-contractors-wake-island-sakaibara/>)
- Wake Island Civilian Survivors Association (<http://www.wakeislandcsa.com/home.html>)
- Wake Island Civilian POW accounts (<http://dogberriypatch.com/archives/morrison-knudsen-wake-island-pows/>)
- Wake Island Civilian POW Account (<http://rims.k12.ca.us/pow/index.html>)
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- *Wake Island: Alamo of the Pacific (2003)* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0372021/>) at the Internet Movie Database
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