

Wake Island



Although Wake is officially called an island in the singular form, it is actually an atoll comprising three islands surrounding a central lagoon: Referring to the atoll as an island is the result of a pre-World War II desire by the United States Navy to distinguish Wake from other atolls, most of which were Japanese territory

Wake Island was annexed as empty territory by the United States on January 17, 1899. In 1935, Pan American Airways constructed a small village, nicknamed "PAAville", to service flights on its U.S.-China route. The village was the first human settlement on the island, and relied upon the U.S. mainland for much of its food and water supplies. However, Wake Island is credited as being one of the early successes of hydroponics, which enabled Pan American Airways to grow vegetables for its passengers, as it was prohibitively expensive to airlift in fresh vegetables and the island lacked natural soil.

PAAville remained in operation up to the day of the first Japanese air raid in World War II. In January 1941, the United States Navy constructed a military base on the atoll. On August 19, the first permanent military garrison, elements of the 1st Marine Defense Battalion totaling 449 officers and men, were stationed on the island, commanded by Navy Commander Winfield Scott Cunningham. Also on the island were 68 U.S. Naval personnel and about 1,221 civilian workers. They were armed with six used 5 inch/51 cal (127 mm) cannons, removed from a scrapped battleship; twelve 3 inch/50 cal (76.2 mm) M3 anti-aircraft guns (with only a single working anti-aircraft director among them); eighteen Browning M2 .50 caliber heavy machine guns; and thirty heavy, medium, and light, water or air-cooled Browning M1917 .30 caliber machine guns in various conditions but all operational.

Battle of Wake Island

On December 8, 1941, the day after the Attack on Pearl Harbor on the opposite side of the International Date Line, at least 27 Japanese Mitsubishi G3M medium "Nell" bombers flown from bases on Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands attacked Wake Island, destroying eight of the 12 F4F Wildcat fighter aircraft belonging to United States Marine Corps fighter squadron VMF-211 on the ground. The Marine garrison's defensive emplacements were left intact by the raid, which primarily targeted the aircraft.

The garrison - supplemented by civilian volunteers - repelled several Japanese landing attempts. An American journalist reported that after the initial Japanese amphibious assault was beaten back with heavy losses on December 11, the American commander was asked by his superiors if he needed anything. The commander sent back the message, "Send us more Japs!" - a reply which became a popular legend. However, when Lt. Col. James Devereux learned after the war that he was credited with that message he pointed out that contrary to reports he was not the commander on Wake Island and denied sending that message. "As far as I know, it wasn't sent at all. None of us was that much of a damn fool. We already had more Japs than we could handle."

In reality, Commander Winfield S. Cunningham was in overall charge of Wake Island, not Devereux. Cunningham ordered that coded messages be sent during operations, and a junior officer had added "send us" and "more Japs" to the beginning and end of a message to confuse Japanese code breakers. This was put together at Pearl Harbor and

passed on as part of the message. Cunningham and Deveraux both wrote books about the battle and their Japanese imprisonment ordeal.

Denied support from Hawaii, the isolated U.S. garrison was eventually overwhelmed by a reinforced and greatly superior Japanese invasion force on December 23. American casualties numbered 52 military personnel (Navy and Marine) and approximately 70 civilians killed. Japanese losses exceeded 700 dead, with some estimates ranging as high as 1,000. Wake's defenders sank two Japanese destroyers and one submarine, and shot down 24 Japanese aircraft.

In the aftermath of the battle, most of the captured civilians and military personnel were sent to POW camps in Asia, though some of the civilian laborers were enslaved by the Japanese and tasked with improving the island's defenses. Captain Henry T. Elrod, USMC, one of the pilots from VMF-211, was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for shooting down two Japanese Zero fighters, sinking a destroyer and later fighting on foot when his plane was destroyed to defend the island. Many of his comrades were also highly decorated for their part in the fighting.

Japanese occupation and surrender



The formal surrender of the Japanese garrison on Wake Island—September 7, 1945

The Islands Japanese garrison was composed of the IJN 65th Guard Unit (2,000 men), Japan Navy Captain Shigematsu Sakaibara and the IJA units which became 13th Independent Mixed Regiment (1,939 men) under command of Colonel Shigeji Chikamori. The Japanese-occupied island (called by them Otori-Shima or "Bird Island" for its birdlike shape) was bombed several times by American aircraft; one of these raids was the first mission for future United States President George H. W. Bush.

After a successful American air raid on October 5, 1943, Sakaibara ordered the execution of all of the 98 captured Americans that remained on the island. They were taken to the northern end of the island, blindfolded, and machine-gunned. One prisoner escaped the massacre, carving the message "98 US PW 5-10-43" on a large coral rock near where the victims had been hastily buried in a mass grave. This unknown American was soon recaptured and beheaded.



Sakaibara and his subordinate, Lieutenant Commander Tachibana, were later sentenced to death for this and other war crimes. Tachibana's sentence was later commuted to life in prison. The remains of the murdered civilians were exhumed and reburied at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in section G.



U.S. Civilian POWs Memorial

During the Japanese occupation, Wake Island's only native species, the flightless Rail Bird was hunted and eaten to extinction, after the Japanese military occupants supply route was cut in 1944. Due to its flightlessness and natural curiosity, it was easy for two men to catch the bird with their hands. The last Wake Island Rail was killed sometime in 1945 by nearly starving Japanese soldiers. On September 4, 1945, the Japanese garrison surrendered to a detachment of United States Marines. The handover of Wake was conducted in a brief ceremony.

Postwar

On 15 October 1950 U.S. President Harry S. Truman and General Douglas MacArthur met on Wake Island (Wake Island Conference) to confer about the progress of the Korean War. They chose to meet at Wake Island because of its closer proximity to Korea so that General MacArthur would not have to be away from the troops in the field for long.

Subsequently the island was used for strategic defense and operations during the Cold War. In 1952 or 1953, the young Kris Kristofferson worked for a dredging contractor on the island. It was administered by the United States Army Space and Missile Defense Command (formerly known as the United States Army Space and Strategic Defense Command). Since 1974, Wake Island has served as a launch platform for military rockets involved in testing anti-missile systems and atmospheric re-entry trials. Launches take place from 19°17'24"N 166°37'05"E. In conjunction with the aerospace use, the island's airstrip, Wake Island Airfield, has been used by the U.S. military and some commercial cargo planes, as well as for emergency landings. There are over 700 landings of all types a year on the island. There are also two offshore anchorages for large ships. On September 16, 1985, the World War II-related resources on Peale, Wilkes, and Wake Islands were designated a National Historic Landmark (and thereby also listed on the National Register of Historic Places).

From late April until the middle of August 1975, Wake Island was used as a refugee camp for more than 8,000 Vietnamese refugees who fled their homeland after the fall of Saigon ended the Vietnam War with a communist victory.

Currently, United States military personnel have left the atoll. There are no indigenous inhabitants. As of August 2006, an estimated 200 contractor personnel ("contractor inhabitants") were present. The island remains a strategic location in the North Pacific Ocean and serves as an emergency landing location for twin-engined ETOPS commercial transpacific flights passing overhead. Some World War II facilities and wreckage remain on the islands.

The territorial claim by the Republic of the Marshall Islands on Wake Atoll leaves a certain amount of ambiguity regarding the actual or hypothetical role of the U.S. military, responsible under agreement for the defense of Marshallese territory in the event of any strategic crisis or hostilities involving Wake. A small separatist group is known as the Kingdom of EnenKio also claims the island. However, the atoll was formally annexed by the United States at the end of the 19th century and is still administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs.

The Wake Island Device was created for American veterans of the battle to wear on their Pacific Theater of Operations ribbon.



The Wake Island Device is authorized for any sailor or marine who was awarded the Navy or Marine Corps Expeditionary Medal due to service during the defense of Wake Island during the opening days of U.S. involvement in the Second World War. To be awarded the Wake Island Device, a service member must have been awarded either the Navy Expeditionary Medal, or the Marine Corps Expeditionary Medal, and must have served on Wake Island between the dates of December 7 and December 22, 1941.



Flag of Wake Island