

# A MAGNIFICENT FIGHT:

## MARINES IN THE BATTLE FOR WAKE ISLAND

MARINES IN  
WORLD WAR II  
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

BY ROBERT J. CRESSMAN





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**I**t is Monday, 8 December 1941. On Wake Island, a tiny sprung paper-clip in the Pacific between Hawaii and Guam, Marines of the 1st Defense Battalion are starting another day of the backbreaking war preparations that have gone on for weeks. Out in the triangular lagoon formed by the islets of Peale, Wake, and Wilkes, the huge silver Pan American Airways *Philippine Clipper* flying boat roars off the water bound for Guam. The trans-Pacific flight will not be completed.

Word of war comes around 0700. Captain Henry S. Wilson, Army Signal Corps, on the island to support the flight ferry of B-17 Flying Fortresses from Hawaii to the Philippines, half runs, half walks toward the tent of Major James P. S. Devereux, commander of the battalion's Wake Detachment. Captain Wilson reports that Hickam Field in Hawaii has been raided.

Devereux immediately orders a "Call to Arms." He quickly assembles his officers, tells them that war has come, that the Japanese have attacked Oahu, and that Wake "could expect the same thing in a very short time."

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**On the cover:** In 1945, RAdm Shigematsu Sakaibara, back to camera at right, surrenders his garrison to returning Americans. (Department of Defense [USMC] Photo 133686)

**At left:** Col Walter L. J. Bayler, reputedly "the last Marine off Wake" in December 1941, is the first to set foot on the island in 1945. (Department of Defense [USMC] Photo 133688)

Meanwhile, the senior officer on the atoll, Commander Winfred S. Cunningham, Officer in Charge, Naval Activities, Wake, learned of the Japanese surprise attack as he was leaving the mess hall at the contractors' cantonment (Camp 2) on the northern leg of Wake. He ordered the defense battalion to battle stations, but allowed the civilians to go on with their work, figuring that their duties at sites around the atoll provided good dispersion. He then contacted John B. Cooke, PanAm's airport manager and requested that he recall the *Philippine Clipper*. Cooke sent the prearranged code telling John H. Hamilton, the captain of the Martin 130 flying boat, of the outbreak of war.

Marines from Camp 1, on the southern leg of Wake, were soon embarked in trucks and moving to their stations on Wake, Wilkes, and Peale islets. Marine Gunner Harold C. Borth and Sergeant James W. Hall

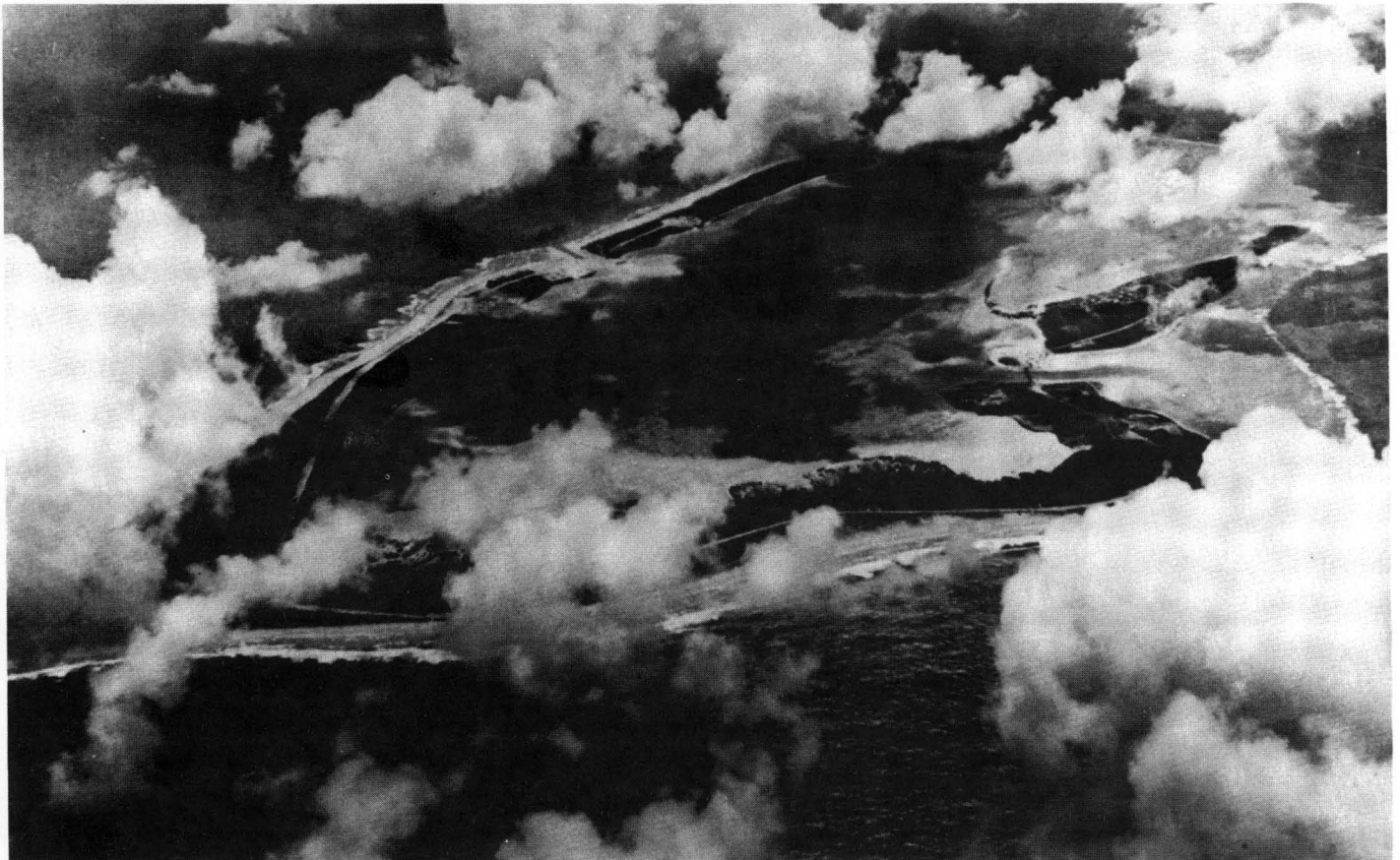
climbed to the top of the camp's water tower and manned the observation post there. In those early days radar was new and not even set up on Wake, so early warning was dependent on keen eyesight. Hearing might have contributed elsewhere, but on the atoll the thunder of nearby surf masked the sound of aircraft engines until they were nearly overhead. Marine Gunner John Hamas, the Wake Detachment's munitions officer, unpacked Browning automatic rifles, Springfield '03 rifles, and ammunition for issue to the civilians who had volunteered for combat duty. That task completed, Hamas and a working party picked up 75 cases of hand grenades for delivery around the islets. Soon thereafter, other civilians attached themselves to Marine Fighting Squadron (VMF) 211, which had been on Wake since 4 December.

Offshore, neither *Triton* (SS 201) nor *Tambor* (SS 198), submarines that had been patrolling offshore since 25 November, knew of develop-

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**M**ajor James P. S. Devereux, Commanding Officer of the Wake Detachment of the 1st Defense Battalion (seen here as a POW at Shanghai, circa January 1942), was born in Cuba and educated in the United States and in Switzerland. Devereux enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1923. He saw service at home (Norfolk, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Quantico, among other places) and abroad (Cuba, Nicaragua, and China). He was awarded the Navy Cross for his leadership of the Marines at Wake. After his retirement, he served in the U.S. House of Representatives.





National Archives Photo 80-G-451195

*A May 1941 photo taken from the northeast, from a Navy Catalina flying boat, reveals the Wake Island coral atoll in the mid-Pacific beneath broken clouds. Wishbone-shaped Wilkes; at right is Peale, joined to Wake by a causeway.*

ments on Wake or Oahu. They both had been submerged when word was passed and thus out of radio communication with Pearl Harbor. The

transport *William Ward Burrows* (AP 6), which had left Oahu bound for Wake on 27 November, learned of the Japanese attack on Pearl while

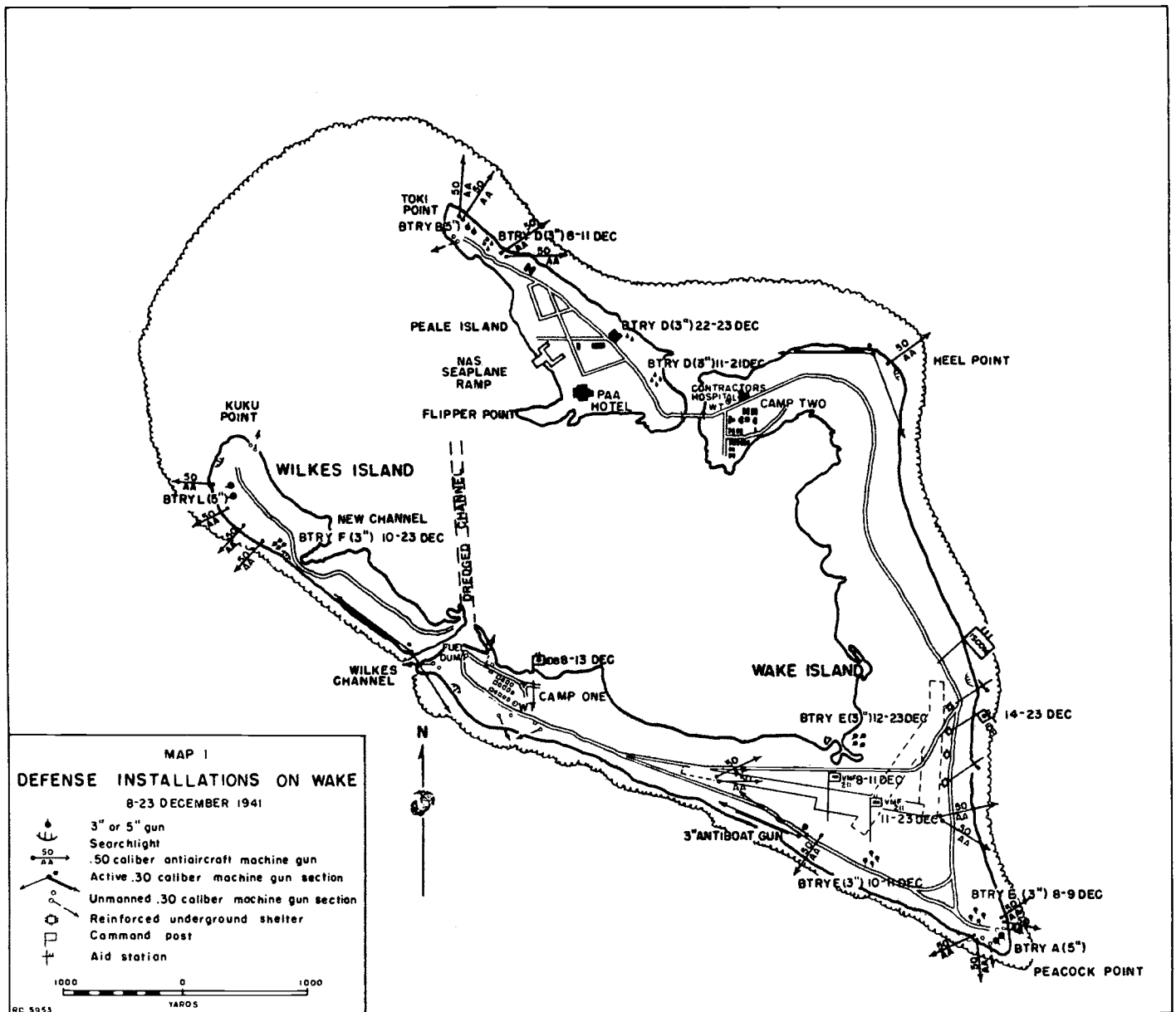
she was still 425 miles from her destination. She was rerouted to Johnston Island.

Major Paul A. Putnam, VMF-211's commanding officer, and Second Lieutenant Henry G. Webb had conducted the dawn aerial patrol and landed by the time the squadron's radiomen, over at Wake's airfield, had picked up word of an attack on Pearl Harbor. Putnam immediately sent a runner to tell his executive officer, Captain Henry T. Elrod, to disperse planes and men and keep all aircraft ready for flight.

Meanwhile, work began on dug-out plane shelters. Putnam placed VMF-211 on a war footing immediately; two two-plane sections then took off on patrol. Captain Elrod and Second Lieutenant Carl R. Davidson flew north, Second Lieutenant John F. Kinney and Technical Sergeant William J. Hamilton flew to the south-southwest at 13,000 feet. Both

**A**n unshaven Commander Winfield S. Cunningham, Officer in Charge, Naval Activities, Wake Island, and commander of the defense of Wake, was photographed as a POW on board the Japanese transport *Nitta Maru*, at Yokohama, Japan, about 18 January 1942. A member of the Naval Academy Class of 1921 and an excellent pilot, he had flown fighters and flying boats, and had been schooled in strategy and tactics. Contemporaries in the Navy regarded him as an intelligent, quick-witted officer who possessed moral courage. His long and varied experience in aviation duty had fitted him well for his independent duty at Wake. He would earn the Navy Cross for his leadership of the defense of Wake.





sections were to remain in the immediate vicinity of the island.

The *Philippine Clipper*, meanwhile, had wheeled about upon receipt of word of war and returned to the lagoon it had departed 20

minutes earlier. Cunningham immediately requested Captain Hamilton to carry out a scouting flight. The *Clipper* was unloaded and refueled with sufficient gasoline in addition to the standard reserve for both the

patrol flight and a flight to Midway. Cunningham, an experienced aviator, laid out a plan, giving the flying boat a two-plane escort. Hamilton then telephoned Putnam and concluded the arrangements for the search.

Major Paul A. Putnam, a "model of strong nerves and the will to fight," is pictured at right in the autumn of 1941. One of his men, Second Lieutenant David Kliever, praised Putnam's "cool judgment, his courage, and his consideration for everyone [that] forged an aviation unit that fought behind him to the end." Putnam had become commanding officer of VMF-211 on 17 November

1941 at Ewa, after having served as executive officer. Designated a naval aviator in 1929, he had flown almost every type of Marine plane from a Ford Trimotor to a Grumman F4F-3. He had distinguished himself in Nicaragua in 1931. One officer who had flown with him there considered him "calm, quiet, soft-spoken . . . a determined sort of fellow." He was awarded a Navy Cross for his heroism at Wake.



## Defensive Mainstay: The M3 Antiaircraft Gun

At right, in the firing position, is an Army pattern M3 3-inch antiaircraft gun of the type that the 1st Defense Battalion had at Wake. Already obsolescent at the outbreak of World War II, this weapon was the mainstay of the defense battalions in the first months of the war. Twelve of these guns were emplaced at Wake.

As early as 1915, the U.S. Army, recognizing the need for a high-angle firing antiaircraft gun and resolving to build one from existing stocks, chose the M1903 seacoast defense gun and redesignated it the M1917. Soon after America's entry into World War I, however, the requirement for a mobile mount (one with less recoil) compelled the selection of the less powerful M1898 seacoast gun for conversion to the M1918. Development of both guns and mounts continued throughout the interwar years, leading ultimately to the standardization of the gun as the M3 on the M2 wheeled mount.

On the eve of World War II, each of the seven Marine defense battalions then activated had 12 3-inch guns in three four-gun batteries. Each mount weighed a little over six tons. The normal crew of eight could fire 25 12.87-pound high-explosive shells per minute. The guns had an effective ceiling of nearly 30,000 feet and an effective horizontal range of 14,780 yards.



Take-off time was 1300.

Shortly after receiving word of hostilities, Battery B's First Lieutenant Woodrow W. Kessler and his men had loaded a truck with equipment and small arms ammunition and moved out to their 5-inch guns. At 0710, Kessler began distributing gear, and soon thereafter established a sentry post on Toki Point at the northernmost tip of Peale. Thirty 5-inch rounds went into the ready-use boxes near the guns. At 0800, he reported his battery ready for action.

General quarters called Captain Bryghte D. "Dan" Godbold's men of Battery D to their stations down the coast from Battery B at 0700, and they moved out to their position by truck, reporting "manned and ready" within a half hour. The lack of men, however, prevented Godbold from having more than three of his 3-inch guns in operation. Within another hour and a half, each gun had 50 rounds ready for firing. At 1000, Godbold received orders to keep one

gun, the director, the heightfinder (the only one at Wake Island for the three batteries), and the power plant manned at all times. After making those arrangements, Godbold put the remainder of his men to work improving the battery position.

While the atoll's defenders prepared for war, Japanese bombers droned toward them. At 0710 on 8 December, 34 Mitsubishi G3M2 Type 96 land attack planes (Nells) of the *Chitose Air Group* had lifted off from the airstrip at Roi in the Marshalls. Shortly before noon, those 34 Nells came in on Wake at 13,000 feet. Clouds cloaked their approach and the pounding surf drowned out the noise of their engines as they dropped down to 1,500 feet and roared in from the sea. Lookouts sounded the alarms as they spotted the twin-engined, twin-tailed bombers a few hundred yards off the atoll's south shore, emerging from a dense bank of clouds. At Battery E, First Lieutenant Lewis telephoned

Major Devereux's command post to inform him of the approaching planes.

Although Putnam was rushing work on the six bunkers being built along the seaward side of the runway, he knew none of them would be ready before 1400. He also knew that moving the eight F4F Wildcats from their parking area would risk damage to the planes and obstruction of the runway if the planes were in fact damaged. Since any damage might have meant the loss of a plane—Wake possessed virtually no spare parts—Putnam decided to delay moving the Wildcats and the materiel until suitable places existed to protect them.

No foxholes had been dug near the field, but the rough ground nearby offered natural cover to those who reached it. Putnam hoped that his men would obtain good cover if an attack came. The movement of gasoline, bombs, and ammunition; the installation of electrical lines and

generators; and the relocation of radio facilities kept all hands busily engaged.

The attack found Second Lieutenant Robert "J" Conderman and First Lieutenant George A. Graves in the ready tent, going over last minute instructions concerning their escort of the *Philippine Clipper*. When the alarm sounded, both pilots, already in flight gear, sprinted for their Wildcats. Graves managed to reach one F4F, but a direct hit demolished it in a ball of flame as he was climbing into the cockpit, killing him instantly. Strafers' bullets cut down Conderman as he tried to reach his plane, and as he lay on the ground a bomb hit the waiting Wildcat and blew it up, pinning him beneath the wreckage. He called to Corporal Robert E. L. Page to help him, but stopped when he heard another man crying for help. He directed Page to help the other man first. Strafing attacks killed Second Lieutenant Frank J. Holden as he raced for cover. Bullets and fragments wounded Second Lieutenant Webb.

Marine Gunner Hamas, who still had 50 cases of hand grenades in his truck, having just delivered 25 to Kuku Point, saw the red sun insignia on the planes as they roared low overhead. Immediately, he ordered the vehicle stopped and instructed his men to head for cover.

Confident that his airborne planes would be able to provide sufficient warning of an incoming raid, Commander Cunningham was working in his office at Camp 2, when he heard the "crump" of bombs around 1155. The explosions rattled windows elsewhere in the camp, prompting many men to conclude that work crews were blasting coral heads in the lagoon.

Guns 1 and 2 of Battery D opened up on the attackers, collectively firing 40 rounds during the raid. The low visibility and the altitude at which the Mitsubishi's flew, however, prevented the 3-inch guns from fir-

ing effectively. No bombs fell near the battery, but the guns' own concussions caved in the sandbag emplacements, Marine anti-aircraft fire damaged eight Nells and killed a petty officer in one of them. Returning Japanese aircrews claimed to have set fire to all of the aircraft on the ground, and reported sighting only three airborne American planes.

On Peacock Point, First Lieutenant Lewis' Battery E had been standing-to, ready to fire. Like Godbold, Lewis did not have enough men for all four of his guns. Lewis manned two of the 3-inchers, along with the M-4 director, while the rest of his men busily

completed sandbag emplacements. After telephoning Devereux's command post when he saw the falling bombs, Lewis quickly estimated the altitude and ordered his gunners to open fire. Again, however, the height at which the attackers came rendered the fire ineffective.

In about seven minutes, Japanese bombs and bullets totally wrecked PanAm's facilities. Bombing and strafing set fire to a hotel—in which five Chamorro employees died—and also to a stock room, fuel tanks, and many other buildings, and demolished a radio transmitter. Nine of PanAm's 66-man staff lay dead.

