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Given the constrained environment the US Armed Forces operate in would it be possible or even strategically feasible to relieve a cutoff force. This study investigates this scenario by using the historical example of Wake Island.

Wake Island is an insignificant strip of coral located in the central Pacific. However, it gained strategic significance during prewar planning. From its location, Wake Island could dominate the sea-lanes through the central Pacific.

After the beginning of hostilities in 1941, the Japanese attacked Wake Island by air for three days before attempting an amphibious assault on 11 December. Miraculously, the defenders repulsed the Japanese. The only time during the Pacific War that an invasion attempt was defeated. Humiliated by the defeat, the Japanese returned on 23 December with a larger force. The defenders, again, put up a stubborn defense but eventually were overwhelmed.

After the defenders defeated the Japanese on 11 December, the Navy's senior leaders were forced to decide on the fate of the men on Wake Island. In the final analysis it was determined that the strategic loss of any of three aircraft carriers operating in the Pacific outweighed the tactical gain of relieving the beleaguered island.

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TACTICAL DEFEAT OR STRATEGIC VICTORY: THE BATTLE FOR WAKE ISLAND, 8-23 DECEMBER 1941

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

TACTICAL DEFEAT OR STRATEGIC VICTORY: THE BATTLE FOR WAKE ISLAND, 8-23 DECEMBER 1941 by MAJ Marlyn. R. Pierce, USA, 108 pages.

Given the constrained environment the US Armed Forces operate in would it be possible or even strategically feasible to relieve a cutoff force. This study investigates this scenario by using the historical example of Wake Island.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

A small force of US Marines is dispatched to secure a strategic interest of the United States. They have made preliminary defensive preparations but are still short of vital equipment. Before this equipment can arrive, a belligerent country attacks US installations throughout the region. These attacks are successful and America is militarily crippled. One bright spot is the stubborn, resolute defense by the Marines who repulse the attacking force. Meanwhile, a second belligerent has declared war on the US in another theater. The country is now faced with two, simultaneous, major regional conflicts with very limited assets to conduct operations.

The matter is further complicated by the presence of hundreds of civilians contracted by the government to improve the installation. A major US corporation is operating an aviation facility in the area and will in all likelihood be a target for the enemy. Unarmed Navy and Army personnel are also operating in the area to provide support to the Marines.

The civilian and military leadership are faced with a dilemma. The gallant Marines, by their heroic efforts, have given the country a badly needed victory. However, in doing so, the Marines have become a liability. The countries' leaders in deciding the fate of the Marines must answer the following questions. With limited resources, should the US scrape together a relief force to rescue the valiant Marines? If the US should, can the US accomplish the mission? Finally, with limited assets, what are the risks involved in this operation?

This is not the setting for an operational exercise, it is the situation senior civilian and military leaders faced following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941. However, in an era of downsizing, reduced budgets, and increasing regional threats, it is a situation the US could face again.

The strategic interest was Wake Island a horseshoe-shaped strip of coral and sand north of the Marshall Islands (figure 1). In 1941 Wake Island was a refueling stop for Pan American Airways (PanAir) Trans-Pacific Air Service. It was also being developed as an observation post and staging

base for ferrying military aircraft.[1] Growing tensions between Japan and the US led the Chief of Naval Operations to direct elements of the 1st Defense Battalion (1st DB) be dispatched to Wake.[2] Defense Battalions (DB) were created specifically to garrison strategic US territories and possessions. Additional garrisons were sent to Johnston, Palmyra, and Midway Islands.[3] Each MDB was equipped with 5-inch naval guns and numerous anti-aircraft and machine guns.[4] Major James P. S. Devereux, an eighteen-year veteran of the Marine Corps, commanded the Marines of the 1st DB on Wake Island. Overall command of the island fell to Commander Winfield S. Cunningham, a naval aviator. Shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Marines on Wake were reinforced by Marine Fighter Squadron 211 (VMF 211), equipped with Grumman F4F-3 Wildcats. See figure 2 for a diagram of US forces.

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[1]Robert D. Heinl, Jr., The *Defense of Wake* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 1.

[2]Ibid., 3.

[3]Ibid., 2.

[4]Ibid., 3.

Japan followed up its successful raid on Pearl Harbor with simultaneous attacks on all major US installations throughout the Pacific. Lacking early warning radar, which was to arrive later, the Wake defenders received very little warning before the enemy struck. Eight of the F4Fs were caught on the ground; seven were destroyed.[5] For the remainder of the battle VMF 211 never put up more than four aircraft.

After several days of aerial bombardment, the Japanese dispatched a force to seize the island. Overconfidence on the part of the Japanese Task Force commander along with resolute leadership and coolness under fire on the part of the defenders doomed the Japanese attempt. The landing force was turned back with the loss of two destroyers and several damaged transports.[6] After days of constant defeats the Americans had a victory.

The news electrified the country. Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, Commander in Chief, US Fleet (CinCUS), had already ordered a relief force be formed around the carrier

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[5]Duane Schultz, *Wake Island: The Heroic Gallant Fight* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 59.

[6]Ibid., 27.

Saratoga.[7] In addition to bringing more Marines and supplies the relief force included an all-important radar set.[8] *Saratoga* was also bringing a squadron of Brewster F2A Buffaloes to replace the destroyed Wildcats. The Task Force set sail 14 December, but Wake fell to a second more determined Japanese assault before the help could arrive.

Given the situation, Was it feasible to attempt to relieve the Marines on Wake Island? Were the forces suitable to accomplish the mission. Finally, and most importantly, was it acceptable to risk meager US forces, at that time, to rescue a handful of Marines, sailors, soldiers and, civilians? The purpose of the thesis is to analyze the answers to these questions as they may relate to the current round of US Armed Forces downsizing and global commitments.

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[7]Ibid., 20.

[8]Robert J. Cressman, *The Battle for Wake Island: A Magnificent Fight,* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 148.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF WAKE ISLAND

Wake Island is an isolated, horseshoe-shaped strip of coral located in the central Pacific (figure 1). Composed of three smaller islets, Wake, Wilkes, and Peale, it is one thousand miles from Pearl Harbor and 500 miles north of the Marshall Islands.[1]

Wake Island has a checkered history. It has been "discovered" numerous times and has been claimed by several countries. Spanish explorer Alvaro de Medina[2] searching for food and water, was the first Westerner to set foot on the island in 1586. Finding neither he named the island San Francisco and left. Two hundred and ten years later Wake Island was "rediscovered" by the English sailor Samuel Wake who fixed its location and named the island after himself. Many other explorers and sailors would make stops at Wake Island, but all would quickly leave the uninhabitable island.

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[1]Throughout this thesis the term Wake Island will refer to all three islets and Wake will be used to denote the islet.

[2]Also spelled Medana in some sources.

An American sailor and explorer, Charles Wilkes, arrived off Wake on 20 December 1840. Along with naturalist Titian Peale, he explored the island documenting the wildlife and collecting coral samples. Afterwards they named the two smaller islets for themselves and left. An American would not set foot on Wake for nearly sixty years.

Following the Spanish-American War, America laid claim to Wake Island, and a small party came ashore in 1898 to raise the flag. America took official possession of the island the following year. Wake Island remained a backwater until 1935 when Pan American airways saw a use for the islands as a refueling point for its fledgling Trans-Pacific air service. Before they could establish their base, they had to overcome the physical barriers imposed by this tiny island.

Wake Island is a typical central pacific atoll. Average temperatures range between 76 degrees in February and 83 degrees in July. Annual rainfall is 37 inches with the heaviest rains between July and September. The predominant winds are the Northeast Trades with the strongest winds in the winter. As a 1942 War Department study on Wake stated, "The climate and weather of Wake have

little bearing on military operations and no effect on terrain."[3] However, the terrain would have a significant effect on the battle.

The three islets which make-up Wake Island are surrounded by a coral barrier reef. The reef ranges from 500 feet on the southwest to 1,000 feet on the northeast and is generally exposed at low tide. A roaring surf pounds constantly against the reef drowning most sound from the direction of the sea. This would have a significant impact on the defenders early warning of approaching aircraft. The shallow lagoon formed by the islets is blocked from seaward entrance by the reef. The depth of the lagoon ranges from two to sixteen feet and is suitable for seaplane operations. The steep sides of the island below sea level are not suitable for regular anchorage. This requires that all supplies be lightered ashore and would be a problem for a landing force attempting to come ashore.

Landing craft approaching at low tide would find the beaches covered with coral rocks and boulders. At high tide the beaches are covered with water, and the submerged rocks

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[3]US War Department, *Study of Wake, Text and Maps* (Washington, DC: Military Intelligence Service, 1942), 6.

and boulders become natural obstacles to landing craft. The beach on the north and northeast shore of Peale and Wilkes Islands runs inland for fifty to three hundred feet and drops about ten feet to the water. The southwestern side of Wilkes and Wake Islands has a gently sloping beach from the shoreline to the line of vegetation. This would be the most logical place to expect an invasion force to come ashore.

The defender would have good fields of fire of the beaches but limited natural cover. The thick low scrub brush, which covers most of the island, would provide concealment for defenders, but would also aid the attacker in infiltrating once ashore. A single road that runs through the three islands is the only avenue for rapidly shifting forces. However, Wilkes is cut off from Wake by a channel where Peale is connected to Wake by a causeway. The average height of the island is twelve feet with three locations that reach twenty feet, Heel Point, the seaward side of Peale and the lagoon side of Wilkes. The predominant feature is the airstrip, which occupies the base of the horseshoe on Wake Island proper. This would be the main objective for a raiding or landing force.

Wake Island has very little key terrain. Each islet may be considered key terrain but there is not one feature that dominates or would hold the key to defending the island. As the 1942 War Department study concluded, "the area of Wake is so small and the military installations so dispersed that the whole area is vital."[4] There is very limited key terrain on Wake Island.

At the turn of the century Wake was not considered key or vital to Navy war planners. The Navy made several survey expeditions to Wake and determined the island was unsuitable as an anchorage. However, as early as 1911 the Navy realized that Japan could use Wake as an outpost.[5] In 1921 Hector C. Bywater wrote about a hypothetical Pacific campaign affording Wake importance as a "well defended fueling station."[6] But it was both the growing tensions between the US and Japan and the airplane that brought

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[4]US War Department, 7.

[5]Robert J. Cressman, *The Battle for Wake Island: A Magnificent Fight* (Annapolis: Naval institute Press, 1995), 3.

[6]Hector C. Bywater, *Sea-Power in the Pacific: A study of the American-Japanese Naval Problem* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 121.

strategic significance to Wake and the other outlying islands.

The Navy was also reevaluating Wake Island based on War Plan Orange. Navy war planners were divided into two camps when it came to pacific strategy. There were the "thrusters" who envisioned the Navy moving boldly and resolutely against the Japanese at the outbreak of hostilities and the "stagers" who anticipated the Navy would move incrementally across the Pacific to make contact with the enemy. The "stagers" would need forward bases to provide anchorage and reconnaissance for the fleet. Wake Island was in an ideal position for the "stagers."

Wake Island sat astride the lines of communication for both the US and Japan. Possession of the island would provide either side with a strategically placed "coral aircraft carrier."[7] This view was becoming apparent to naval planners as well as naval writers. In 1935 Rear Admiral William S. Pye, director of war plans wrote a memo to the Chief of Naval Operations emphasizing the importance of Wake and Midway and urging their development. He gave

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[7]J. Robert Moskin, *The United States Marine Corps Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1982), 238.

priority to Midway, but observed they must be "controlled by our own forces. We must get there first."[8] Rear Admiral Pye will return later to play a crucial role in the story of Wake Island.

As of 1938 there had been no direct military construction on Wake. This was due both to the Washington Treaty and the economic constraints caused by the depression.[9] However, in 1938 Congress directed the Secretary of the Navy to convene a board to study possible naval bases on the US coasts, territories, and possessions. This board was placed under the direction of Rear Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn, commandant of the 12th Naval District.

The Hepburn Board returned to congress in 1939 with the results of their investigation. They determined that Wake Island was third in strategic importance behind Pearl Harbor and Midway. They further recommended that facilities be

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[8]Chief, War Plans Division to Chief of Naval Operations, Memorandum, Subject: "Development of Midway and Wake Islands for Naval Use," 12 December 1935, quoted in Cressman, 11.

[9]Article XIX of the Washington Treaty of 1922 forbid the US from fortifying its possession west of the 180th meridian. This included both Wake Island and Guam.

constructed to accommodate one seaplane squadron which "would be vital at the outbreak of war in the Pacific."[10]

Responsibility now fell to the Congress to act upon the finding of the Hepburn Board. Congress authorized $65 million for construction on Wake Island but only appropriated $2 million for fiscal year 1940. But in the political world of Washington the money for Wake was cut before President Roosevelt could sign the appropriation bill.[11] There would not be any military construction on Wake during 1940. For all its perceived strategic importance in War Plan Orange, Wake Island was now three years behind Midway in construction.[12]

Civilian construction on Wake, however, was booming. In 1935 Pan American Airways (PanAir) requested permission to construct a stopover for planned Trans-pacific air

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[10]US Congress, House of Representatives, *Report on Need of Additional Naval Bases to Defend the Coasts of the United States, Its Territories, and Possessions*, quoted in Cressman 26.

[11]Ibid., 6.

[12]Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U. S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 243.

service.[13] The Navy readily agreed with the proviso that PanAir would allow the Navy to approve construction. The intent was to ensure PanAir facilities would meet Navy requirements in the event of war. This subtle subterfuge was intended to bypass the Washington Treaty and get some military facilities on Wake.[14]

PanAir chose to build on Peale Island, the northeastern islet. By the time PanAir began service in the fall of 1935 they had made considerable improvements to the island. They had constructed a water catchment system as the wells they had dug produced only brackish water. Wakes soil would not support gardening so they experimented with hydroponics. For the comfort of their guests, PanAir built a luxurious hotel, though luxury could be relative on Wake Island. But their crowning achievement was the construction of a full-service seaplane ramp, which extended from Peale into the lagoon. The US Navy continued to observe PanAir's

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[13]Miller, 239. PanAir could have skipped the layovers at Wake Island and Midway if they had taken smaller payloads. This would have also meant smaller profits.

[14]Cressman, 10.

construction with interest, but in 1941 money was appropriated for military construction on Wake Island.[15]

Once the oversight on funding for construction was corrected, the Navy quickly went to work. Contracts were let, and in November 1940 the first of what would become 1,041 civilian workers arrived on Wake. They immediately established a sprawling camp on the northeast corner of Wake across from the PanAir facility. The contractor's mission was to develop the infrastructure to make Wake a functioning naval air station in order to observe Japanese movements.

Following World War I, for its service to the Allies cause, Japan received Germany's colonies in the Pacific. These included holdings in the Marshall Islands. Overnight Japan extended her outposts half way across the Pacific and gave Japan a position to threaten Hawaii.[16]

Japan's strategy for a Pacific war with the US had always been defensive. The Japanese understood that the US

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[15]Miller, 243. Wake moved up in priority from 730 (behind the Pearl Harbor Officers Club) to 8.

[16]Robert Debs Heinl, Jr. COL, USMC, *Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1775-1962* (Baltimore: Nautical and Aviation Publishing Co. of America, 1962), 256.

Navy's (USN) plan was to sail westward and engage the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) in a climactic battle. The IJN planned to harass the USN on its trek across the Pacific. Once in home waters the IJN would destroy the significantly reduced and demoralized US forces.

The series of embargoes initiated by President Roosevelt forced Japan to rethink their strategy. In order to secure the raw materials she needed, Japan would have to seize the natural resource rich region of Malaysia and Indonesia. But Japan could not leave its flank exposed to the US bases to the east. Japanese naval planners began to look at offensive operations to secure this flank.

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto was the leading proponent for a quick strike at the US Pacific Fleet followed by seizure of the US outposts. The goal would be to cripple US offensive capability and establish a chain of outposts to observe and harass the US Navy. Wake Island was seen as one of the keys to this strategy.

All the strategic considerations that made Wake Island appealing to the US also applied to Japanese strategic planners. It would be a key outpost for observation aircraft and could be used as a springboard for further

attacks against the US. It also provided the Japanese with a positive psychological advantage of seizing enemy territory. With the inverse for the US.

This tiny speck of coral was quickly gaining significance to both sides. The US needed Wake Island to maintain observation of the Japanese Navy and as a refueling point for aircraft. The Japanese wanted Wake Island for the same reasons but they also saw it as a brick in their defensive perimeter to protect their expanding empire. The problem for the Japanese was seizing Wake Island. Standing in their way would be the United States Marine Corps.

Following World War I, the Marine Corps entered another round of justifying its existence. Marine leaders cast about for a role that would set the Marines apart and make them indispensable. As they looked over the strategic situation, the Marines realized that in any war with Japan it would be necessary to seize island outposts for future operations. The Marines began experimenting with amphibious warfare and became the experts on landing operations. Along with seizing islands, the Marines assumed they would have to defend the islands the US already possessed. Based on that assumption the Marines analyzed base defense problems. In

1933 the Marines fully accepted these concepts, and Marine schools changed their curriculum from an US Army land warfare orientation to base defense and seizure.[17]

Concurrently with the Hepburn Board the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Major General Thomas Holcomb ordered an inspection of Wake. The purpose of this inspection was to determine defensive requirements. Colonel Harry K. Pickett headed the inspection team and believed that Wake Island could only be defended for a period of time against a determined enemy.[18] Following the Hepburn Boards report, Admiral Leahy announced the formation of four defense battalions. These initial battalions were to garrison Wake Island, Midway, Unalaska, and Guantanamo.[19]

Marine Defense Battalions were designed to be compact, robust organizations to defend these advance bases. They were heavy in artillery and antiaircraft weapons and were

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[17]Moskin, 223.

[18]Cressman, 15. Colonel Pickett also laid out the base for the defense by marking potential positions for the five-inch gun batteries. He estimated that it would take between 510-725 men to man the defenses.

[19]Ibid., 13.

viewed as essentially coastal artillery.[20] Though the DBs could be rapidly deployed to an area their lack of transport made them virtually static once in place.

In March 1941, 1st Defense Battalion (DB) was dispatched to Palmyra and Johnston Islands. Five months later 485 officers and Marines from 1st DB were deployed to Wake Island taking with them all of the battalion's heavy weapons.[21]

When the Marines arrived on Wake Island in August 1941, civilian contractors had been on the island for almost ten months. In that time they had established an elaborate base camp and had begun work on the airfield on Wake proper. However, due to contractual reasons, they were prevented from assisting the Marines in preparing defensive positions. Therefore, the Marines were left with the daunting task of emplacing their heavy weapons by hand. Occasionally the contractors would loan the grateful Marines some of their heavy equipment.[22]

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[20]Moskin, 222.

[21]Heinl, *Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1775-1962,* 310 & 325.

[22]Robert D. Heinl, Jr., *The Defense of Wake* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), 5 &

On 15 October Major James P. S. Devereux the executive officer of 1st DB arrived to assume command of the detachment. Surveying the situation he realized there was much work to be done and very little time to accomplish it with the assets available. He set the detachment to working twelve-hour days, seven days a week in order to rapidly bring the defenses up to standard. Long hours and hard work, however, could not overcome the material and personnel shortages of the 1st DB.

1st DB was authorized three 3-inch antiaircraft batteries of four guns each, but the Wake detachment only had enough personnel to man two batteries. Only one Battery (D) had both a range and height finder. Battery E (3-inch) only had a range finder and would have to rely on inputs from Battery D for height information.[23] However, the most critical omission would be the lack of radar. Without this vital early warning, the defenders would have to rely on visual observation of enemy forces approaching the island.

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6. Despite the pressures of the coming war and even after Pearl Harbor, the civilian contractors never came fully under military control.

[23]Heinl, *The Defense of Wake*, 10.

To engage these forces, Major Devereux positioned his weapons systems to be mutually supporting. The 5-inch batteries, of two guns each, were positioned at the extreme points of the island.[24] Battery A at Peacock Point on Wake, Battery B at Toki Point on Peale, and Battery L at Kuku Point on Wilkes. At least two batteries could be brought to bear on any approaching landing force.

The 3-inch antiaircraft batteries were positioned to protect the coastal guns. Battery D, the only complete 3-inch battery, was also able to cover the PanAir installation. Scattered around these sites and at key locations were numerous .50 caliber antiaircraft machine guns and .30 caliber light machine guns. Additionally each Marine had his personal weapon, the 1903 30-06 Springfield bolt action rifle.

Communications between firing positions and the headquarters were by accomplished by wire. Wire communications, while secure, are vulnerable to being cut by indirect fire or by the enemy. Communications would fail at

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[24]The same positions that had been marked earlier by Colonel Pickett.

a critical time in the battle and affect decisions by Major Devereux and Commander Cunningham.

The defenders of Wake Island may have been short on personnel, but they were adequately supplied. The Marines had a ninety-day supply of rations, and the contractors six months.[25] The water catchment system provided more than enough to meet the needs of Marines and civilians alike. A small contingent of Navy corpsmen operated medical facilities on Wake and the contractors had a full hospital on their camp.[26] Two 25,000-gallon tanks for aviation fuel were in place for use by the Marine aviation squadron to be stationed on Wake.

VMF 211, under the command of Major Paul A. Putnam, was the last piece of the defense to arrive. They flew their F4F-3 Grumman Wildcats off the *Enterprise* on 4 December and landed on the partially completed airstrip. Only one leg of the airstrip was complete, and it was not wide enough to allow sections of aircraft, two, to take off simultaneously, a significant handicap during a scramble. The revetments to protect the aircraft had not been completed, and there was

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[25]Heinl, *The Defense of Wake,* 11.

[26]Ibid., 12.

very little apron along the strip to disperse the planes. Those aircraft on the ground would be vulnerable during an air attack. To prevent surprise, Commander Cunningham immediately set Major Putnam and his pilots patrolling the island. They conducted patrols at dawn and dusk. Four aircraft were in the air during these patrols.

On 6 December, Wake time, Major Devereux called an alert. Pleased with the results he gave his tired Marines the next day off. It was their first break since arriving on Wake. They little knew it would be their last day of leisure for the next four years.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BATTLE FOR WAKE ISLAND

The morning of 8 December, 7 December in Pearl Harbor began like every other morning on Wake Island. The Marines were finishing breakfast and preparing for the days work duties following their day of rest. Nearly simultaneously Commander Cunningham and Major Devereux were notified that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. The message from Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) further warned that an attack of Wake Island could be imminent. The island went to general quarters.[1]

The Marines began deploying to their battle stations. Major Devereux had streamlined the process by pre-positioning ammo at the battery positions.[2] Within forty-five minutes all ground positions reported manned and ready.

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[1]There is a controversy over who alerted the command. Both Devereux and Cunningham claim responsibility but the majority of sources support Devereux's assertion. With direct communication to his command post it is most likely that Major Devereux alerted the defenders.

[2]James P. S. Devereux, *The Story of Wake Island* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1947), 32.

VMF 211's morning patrol had been up before news of the Japanese attack arrived.

The planes on the ground were still vulnerable; revetments would not be ready before 1400.[3] Major Putnam decided to leave the planes dispersed as they were rather than risk damaging the planes by moving them farther from the airfield.[4] Additionally, the airmen had not had time to dig slit trenches or foxholes; in the event of attack they would seek what cover they could. These preparations would have to do until the civilian contractors could lend a hand.

After receiving news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Dan Teeters, supervisor of the civilian contractors, asked Commander Cunningham how he and his men could help. Both agreed the best course of action for the civilians was to continue to work on the Naval Air Station.[5] Many civilians

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[3]Lieutenant Colonel Frank O. Hough, USMCR, et al., *Pearl Harbor to Guadacanal: History of the US Marine Corps Operations in World War II*, vol. I (Washington, DC: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, Headquarters, US Marine Corps), 106.

[4]Major Putnam later would call this the worst decision he could have made. Even dispersed the planes were still vulnerable parked along the runway.

[5]W. Scott Cunningham with Lydel Sims, *Wake Island Command* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 54-55. Commander Cunningham believed the dispersion of the workers

did volunteer to assist in the defense and would acquit themselves admirably during the battle. Others simply hid in the jungle until the battle was over. On Peale the PanAir personnel were making their own preparations.

The PanAir clipper was recalled shortly after taking off for Guam. The captain of the clipper, a naval reserve officer, volunteered to fly a long-range patrol. Commander Cunningham agreed and the flight was set for 1300.

At 1150 27 Japanese bombers, from Roi, descended out of a fortuitous rainsquall to attack Wake Island.[6] Lacking radar the defenders had to rely on visual observation. Hampered by the low clouds, the lookouts did not see the enemy planes until they were several hundred yards off shore. By the time the alarm went out the Japanese planes were on their bombing runs.

The Japanese began systematically destroying the airfield before turning their attention to Peale Island and the PanAir facility. The 3-inch batteries and the .50 caliber machine guns returned fire. However, lack of

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going about their work would be their best protection.

[6]Devereux, 50.

warning and the low level of the Japanese bombers rendered their fire ineffective. In a matter of minutes, the Japanese had laid waste to Wake's key installations.

The defenders cannot be totally faulted for the lack of preparation. Up until this day they had been on a peacetime routine. As one Marine explained it to the author he felt by going to the Pacific he was getting further away from the war.[7] Major Devereux tried to instill a sense of urgency by working his men seven days a week but they were still hampered by a lack of resources.

The PanAir facility was leveled and sustained thirty-seven civilian casualties. The Clipper in the lagoon had several bullet holes but was still air worthy. It would depart Wake Island for Midway at 1330 loaded with PanAir's passengers and caucasian employees.[8] But it was not the Pan Air facility the Japanese were after.

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[7]Corporal Franklin D. Gross, telephone interview with author, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 15 February 1998.

[8]Robert J. Cressman, *A Magnificent Fight: The Battle for Wake Island* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995) 91. The remaining Guamanian employees reported to Dan teeters for work.

Commander Cunningham drove to the airfield immediately following the air raid.[9] He found a scene of total destruction with dead and wounded laying about the airfield. Putnam and his men were doing what they could for the wounded. The 125,000-gallon fuel tanks were burning and debris was scattered about the airfield. Seven of the Grummans had been destroyed and the eighth severely damaged. To make matters worse, one of the four planes on patrol was damaged on landing. Wake Island now had three operational aircraft.

Later that evening Commander Cunningham reported the attack to Pearl Harbor. The consensus of the leadership on Wake Island was that in spite of being prepared to the best of their ability they had still taken a beating. They would not let it happen again.

After a fitful night's rest and numerous false reports of ships offshore, the island's defenders set about improving their defenses. Fighting positions were dug and the Army radio truck was unloaded and the equipment moved in

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[9]Cunningham, 59.

to an empty ammunition bunker.[10] Dan Teeter's men completed the revetments for VMF 211's aircraft.

Through hard work and ingenuity Lieutenant John F. Kinney, VMF 211's maj

planes ready for the morning patrol.[11] These were on patrol when the Japanese returned with twenty-six aircraft at 1145.

The pilots of VMF 211 jumped the Japanese bombers south of the island. They claimed one destroyed but it could not be confirmed. As the bombers approached Wake Island, the Marine pilots broke off to avoid the islands anti-aircraft fire.

The bombers arrived over Wake Island at 11,000 feet. This altitude made the gunner's job easier. The Marines were able to put up more accurate fire than the previous day and this effected the enemy's accuracy. The Japanese target this day was Camp 2, the contractor camp, and the defenses on Peacock Point. During the raid, they destroyed the

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[10]Devereux, 72.

[11]R. D. Heinl, Jr., Lt Col, USMC, *The Defense of Wake* (Historical Section, Division of Public Information, Headquarters, US marine Corps, 1947), 16. Lieutenant John F. Kinney was named maintenance officer after Lieutenant George A. Graves had been killed in the raid on 8 December.

civilian hospital on Camp 2 killing many of the wounded. Casualties and damage was minimal at Peacock Point.

However, one of the planes broke formation and circled over Peacock Point. Marine Gunner Clarence B. Mckinstry believed they were photographing Battery E, the 3-inch battery on Wake. McKinstry suggested that the battery be relocated. Major Devereux concurred, along with help from the civilians, the Marines spent the remainder of the day and night moving the eight-ton guns fifteen hundred yards to the northwest.[12] Dummy guns were put in the old location. The battery reported manned and ready by 0500.[13]

On 10 December, the Japanese attacked with eighteen bombers. McKinstry's hunch was confirmed when the bombers deliberately attacked Battery E's old position before turning their attention on Battery L on Wilkes.[14] The Japanese bombing of Wilkes was accurate and effective. They set off a cache of dynamite that shook the island and stripped the camouflage from Battery F's (3-inch) position.

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[12]Cressman, 103.

[13]Hough, et al., 112.

[14]Devereux, 76.

The explosion also knocked over a searchlight and damaged much of the fire control equipment for the 5-inch guns.[15] Casualties, fortunately, were light.

Once again the fighters of VMF 211 attacked the bombers, this time they claimed two destroyed. The anti-aircraft gunners claimed several of the bombers left smoking. Major Devereux, suspecting the enemy was deliberately targeting the 3-inch batteries, ordered Battery E (3-inch) to relocate once again. The Marines were settling into a wartime routine.

Unbeknownst to the defenders a Japanese Task force had departed Truk on 8 December and would be off Wake on the evening of 10 December (figure 4). This task force, commanded by Rear Admiral Kajioka Sadamichi Inoue, consisted of three Light Cruisers (CL), six Destroyers (DD), two transports that were converted destroyers, two regular transports and two submarines.[16] The plan was to attack Wake Island from the southwest, as Colonel Pickett predicted. Four hundred and fifty soldiers from the Special

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[15]Cressman, 105.

[16]Hough, et. al., 116.

Naval Landing Force (SNLF), Japanese equivalent of the Marines was allocated for the operation. One hundred and fifty would land on Wilkes and three hundred on Wake. The Japanese believed this force would be more than adequate to defeat the defenders.

They estimated Wake Island's strength fairly accurately at 300 Marines, 1000 civilians, coastal batteries and numerous anti-aircraft weapons.[17] Admiral Kajioka overestimated the effectiveness of the Japanese preparatory attacks and underestimated the ability of the defenders.

Around 0300 11 December lookouts began reporting ships on the horizon: Commander Cunningham alerted his command. He also ordered the guns to remain covered and not to fire until he gave the order.[18] The Japanese ships continued to approach the darkened island. In the predawn darkness Admiral Kajioka ordered the SNLF into the landing craft. Many SNLF soldiers were lost as they tried to board the transports in the pitching seas.

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[17]Cressman, 114.

[18]This is another point of contention. Both Cunningham and Devereux claim credit for this tactic. Research has not clarified this issue.

At 0500 *Yubari*, the flagship of the task force, led the bombardment force to a point 8000 yards south of Peacock Point (figure 5). The ships turned west and began bombarding the island.[19] They raked the entire length of Wake and Wilkes. Getting no response from the defenders the ships turned closer to Wake.

On the airstrip Major Putnam prepared his four operational aircraft for take off, only three would start.[20] At 0515 he led the three aircraft to a holding area north of the Island. Twenty minutes later the fourth F4F took off as the Japanese warships continue to close the distance.

Battery A (5-inch) uncovered its camouflage and began tracking the approaching ships. The anxious gunners continuously called Devereux's CP requesting permission to fire. Major Devoured denied all requests.

At 0615 Gunner Hamas called Commander Cunningham from Major Devereux's CP notifying him that the Japanese ships were at 4600 yards. Commander Cunningham gave the word to

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[19]Hough, et al., 117.

[20]Cressman, 117.

"cut loose at them."[21] Moments later the grateful Marine gunners opened fire.

Initially only Batteries A (5-inch) and L (5-inch) could bring their guns to bear on the Japanese fleet. Battery A at Peacock Point began engaging the lead ship, *Yubari*. The first salvos were over and *Yubari* shifted fire to Battery A. The battery commander, First Lieutenant Clarence A. Barniger, adjusted fire and scored two hits on the light cruiser. Two destroyers came to the aid of the stricken flagship laying a smoke screen to cover its withdrawal. The gunners at Peacock Point then shifted fire to the destroyer transports. They damaged one forcing it to turn away. Battery L (5-inch) on Wilkes now went into action.

Battery L was still short a range finder following the previous days attack. Second Lieutenant John A. McCalister, commander of Battery L, stood on top of his outpost estimating the range to the lead destroyer. Battery L landed two salvos on *Hayate* a third salvo broke the destroyer in two. *Hayate* sank in two minutes taking all her

[21]Cunningham, 88.

crew with her. The Marine gunners briefly celebrated before being ordered to return to the task at hand.

The gunners began engaging the following transports scoring several hits on the lead ship. As the transports departed Battery L engaged one of the light cruisers hitting her in the stern as she departed. Battery L had fired 120 rounds in one hour.[22]

The battle had now moved far enough north for Battery B (5-inch) to engage the remaining destroyers. Japanese return fire was more effective against Battery B than the others. However, the gunners were able to set one destroyer afire before losing gun number one. Laying a smoke screen the destroyers quickly moved out of range.

At 0700 Admiral Kajioka ordered a withdrawal. The crippled task force turned to make the journey back to Kwajalein. But the fight was far from over. It was now the turn of VMF 211 to strike.

Major Putnam had initially led his four aircraft on a search for any Japanese aircraft carriers supporting the

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[22]Hough, et al., 118.

invasion. Finding none the flight turned to pursue the retreating task force.

Each of the four Grummans was armed with two, 100 lb. bombs. They dove on the ships with a vengeance. Damaging two light cruisers and a transport. The pilots quickly returned to Wake to re-arm and refuel. They would eventually shuttle between Wake Island and the Japanese task force ten times sinking another destroyer and damaging many other ships.

The Japanese had relearned the old sea lesson: ships cannot defeat fixed fortifications. By noon the task force had lost two destroyers sunk one transport set afire, two destroyers and three light cruisers damaged.[23] Personnel losses are not known: a minimum of 185 sailors lost their lives when *Hayate* went down and an unknown number of SNLF troops were lost trying to board landing craft. The defenders did not have long to enjoy their success.

At 1000 the Japanese bombers returned. Once again VMF 211 and the 3-inch batteries were ready. The Marine fighters claimed three enemy bombers destroyed and fourteen

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[23]Hough, et al., 120.

more damaged. Bombing by the scattered bombers was ineffective. VMF 211's last success for the day would be claiming a submarine.[24]

Later that day Commander Cunningham sent a report of the day's events to Pearl Harbor.[25] CINCPAC's response was a simple "Splendid work."[26] The American press on the other hand had a field day with the news. Editorials and political cartoons ran in every newspaper singing the praises of the Marines. The "Send more Japs" legend began at this time.[27] The Wake Island defenders had given American morale a much-needed boost.

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[24]This submarine has never been officially credited to VMF 211 however the Japanese reported losing contact with a submarine in the Wake Island area around this time. This submarine was eventually reported as lost.

[25]Miraculously, Commander Cunningham maintained contact with Pearl Harbor up until the surrender.

[26]Cressman, 127 quoting *USS Enterprise* (CV-6), War Information Bulletin No. 2, in Rawie Diary, December 1941.

[27]Commander Cunningham claims the phrase "Send more Japs" was inserted as padding in a message to CINCPAC. Cunningham's claim is supported by Corporal Franklin D. Gross. He informed the author that the radio operator related the same story to him. All sources confirm the defenders were not pleased by the publicity the message generated. The last thing any of them wanted was "...more Japs." However, this legend may never die. In recently published book on men in battle the author states the following: "The last message sent out before Devereux and

The Japanese, on the other hand, did not publicly acknowledge the defeat for the three days. And then it only stated the IJN had shelled the island and ended with: "Our side suffered damage, too."[28] They did reassess their strategy and the next invasion would better supported.

Overall, 11 December had been a good day for the defenders they handed the Japanese a crushing defeat and had suffered minor casualties. But the day ended on a somber note as they buried their dead. After a brief service by a lay preacher from the construction crew the defenders returned to preparing their defenses for the next day.[29]

The twelfth of December began with a raid by two flying boats at 0500. One of the VMF 211's three operational fighters intercepted the flying boats and shot one down.[30] The defenders then set about the days activities and waited for the usual afternoon raid. The Japanese did not return.

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his men were overwhelmed was...simply: "Send more Japs." This was definitely not the last message but the legend continues to grow.

[28]Cressman, 139.

[29]Cunningham, 96.

[30]Hough, et al., 121-122.

The next day was even better; there was no raid at all. The men on Wake took advantage of the lull to clean up and get a good meal. One of VMF 211's fighters crashed on take-off bringing the number operational aircraft down to two.

Major Devereux calls the days 14-20 December "When time stood still."[31] The days were a blur of Japanese raids and improvement of the defensive positions. Varying the time of the raids the Japanese were paying particular attention to the 5-inch batteries. They had learned their lesson. Major Devereux occasionally displaced the 3-inch batteries to keep the Japanese from fixing their position. Lieutenant Kinney continued to keep VMF 211 in the fight though the strength varied from three to one aircraft. With no spare parts the defenses were slowly being worn down through attrition.

Along with heavy rains on 20 December the defenders received a ray of hope. A Catalina patrol plane from Pearl Harbor arrived with information for Commander Cunningham. He was to prepare all but essential civilians for evacuation. Best of all, reinforcements were in route. These included elements of the 4th DB and VMF 221.[32] And

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[31]Devereux, 104.

[32]VMF 221 was equipped with F2A Brewster Buffaloes,

most importantly a radar set was part of the load plan. The relief force would arrive off Wake Island on 24 December Wake time.

After receiving written reports from Commander Cunningham and Majors Devereux and Putnam, the Catalina departed at 0700 the next day.[33] Two hours later the island was attacked by twenty-nine single engine dive bombers escorted by Zero fighters.[34] All the good news of the previous day was lost with the appearance of those twenty-nine aircraft.

Single engine aircraft meant a Japanese carrier was in the area. There were, in fact, two carriers, *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, from Carrier Division 2. They had been detached from the withdrawing Pearl Harbor force following the defeat on 11 December. The defenders situation went from hopeful to desperate in a matter of hours. It was worse than the men on Wake Island could have imagined.

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aircraft that would, later in the war, prove to be wholly inadequate against the Japanese Zeros.

[33]Hough, et al., 127.

[34]Cunningham, 118.

Besides detaching Carrier Division 2 to support the next invasion attempt the IJN had beefed up the assault force (figure 6). Added to the force was Cruiser Division 6 (four cruisers), Cruiser Division 8 (two newer cruisers) and six destroyers.[35] The occupation force had also been increased. Added were four heavy cruisers, two light cruisers and six destroyers. One thousand five hundred soldiers of the SNLF would be embarked, 1000 for the initial assault and a 500 man reserve. As an indication of the Japanese determination to seize Wake Island, if the things were going bad, the destroyers would be beached and the crews assist the assault.[36] Wake Island would fall.

To emphasize this point the Japanese followed up the raid on 21 December with a thirty-three plane raid on 22 December.[37] Wake islands two remaining operational F4Fs dove on the bombers without regards to the odds. On the first pass the Marines downed two of the bombers before the Zeros were on them. One of the Grummans was badly shot up

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[35]Heinl, 36.

[36]Ibid., 37.

[37]Hough, et. al., 128.

and the wounded pilot crashed on landing. The other was last seen chasing a Japanese fighter with another on his tail.[38] There were no more fighters to defend Wake Island.

VMF 211 had put up a magnificent defense. Constantly short of parts and equipment they continuously put up aircraft until they were no longer capable. After the last plane was written off, Major Putnam marched his men off to report as riflemen. They were ordered to remain at the airfield and await orders.[39] It would not be long before VMF 211 would prove themselves capable infantrymen.

Around midnight the Japanese Task Force arrived off Wake Island. At 0200 23 December the SNLF soldiers began boarding their landing craft. Once again the seas were rough but the operation went smoother. The larger group in two destroyer transports headed for Wake. A smaller force in landing barges made for Wilkes.

The defenders had been on alert since 0100 when a reported landing on Toki Point had arrived at Devereux's CP.

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[38]Devereux, 145.

[39]Cressman, 191.

The report turned out to be false. But the Marines remained alert.

At 0235 Wilkes reported motor noises along the beach.[40] Major Devereux gave the Marines permission to illuminate the beach. In the glaring light the Marines could see two landing barges dismounting Japanese. The light also illuminated the two destroyer transports (Patrol Craft 32 and 33) that had run aground on Wake.

Battery A (5-inch) on Peacock Point could not bring its guns to bear on the Patrol Craft. Second Lieutenant Robert J. Hanna gathered a crew and moved to man a 3-inch gun positioned for beach defense. Hanna engaged the nearest Patrol Craft over open sights from 500 yards. Hanna's first shot struck the bridge and he quickly put fourteen more into the ship, which burst into flame. The light illuminated the second vessel and Hanna took it under fire. However, one hundred soldiers of the SNLF were ashore and working their way to the airfield.

Major Devereux had previously dispatched his mobile reserve, eight enlisted Marines and four .30-caliber machine guns to the west end of the airstrip. The runway gave them

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[40]Heinl, 43.

an excellent field of fire. Major Devereux then reformed his reserve from the 3-inch battery on Peale Island. These 40 Marines and civilians reported to his CP.

At this point Major Devereux began losing contact with his units. First to go was Wilkes Island then slowly but surely the other positions stopped reporting. Devereux's inability to communicate with his units would have a significant impact on the battle. In the meantime it was up to the initiative and courage of the small detachments to defend the island.

Lieutenant Arthur A. Poindexter, commander of the mobile reserve, noticed several .30-caliber machine guns firing along the beach. He went to investigate. He found the gunners engaging two barges attempting to land south of Camp 1. The intense fire of the machine guns was not penetrating the barges but was keeping them at bay. Lieutenant Poindexter gathered several men, some hand grenades and headed to the beach.

The machine guns lifted their fire as Poindexter and his band waded into the surf. They began lobbing grenades at the barges as they approached. One landed in a barge causing numerous casualties. Despite this success the enemy

successfully debarked 75-100 soldiers who fanned out into the scrub around Camp 1.[41]

Meanwhile, Devereux had dispatched Major Putnam and his aviators to reinforce Lieutenant Hanna's position. The Japanese realized they had to silence the 3-inch gun. They began a series of charges to eliminate the small band of Marines protecting the gun. VMF 211's personnel again showered themselves with honor repelling all attacks. But they were no longer in a position to prevent enemy forces from moving east.[42]

Lieutenant Poindexter was able to get one last message to Devereux from Camp One before communications was lost. At this point Major Devereux began losing communications with units scattered about the island.[43] The battle for Wake was become a series of small unit actions.

On Wake, Lieutenant Poindexter continued to hold his position near Camp One, Lieutenant Hanna and the aviators

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[41]Ibid., 46.

[42]Ibid., 47.

[43]Hough, et al., 137. Survivors believe the lines were being cut as the Japanese advanced. Other researchers believe a break in the line near Devereux's CP was the cause.

from VMF 211 held on to the 3-inch gun but were limited to merely defending the gun. A nine man squad had been dispatched to reinforce Hanna but had been pinned down and eventually withdrew to the CP.[44] Lieutenant David D. Kliewer was manning the generator near the west end of the airfield. His job was to set off the charges that would crater the airfield. Battery A (5-inch) was cut off at Peacock Point and the Battery Commander had detached part of his range crew to protect his position. On Wilkes the situation was confused but Captain Wesley M. Platt, commander of the defense, was beginning to gain control of the situation.

About one hundred soldiers of the SNLF had landed on the southern corner of the Wilkes. As they moved inland they came under fire from the men of the Battery F (3-inch). The Japanese continued to press their attack and eventually forced the Marines to abandon the guns. The gunners moved into positions east of the battery and effectively blocked the enemies advance in that direction.

Checked to the east the Japanese began to advance to the west. They immediately came under fire from two well

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[44]Ibid., 141.

camouflaged .50-caliber machine guns (Nos. 9 and 10). The Japanese advance was blocked once again.

Meanwhile, Captain Platt was having the same communication problem as Devereux. Fortunately, he could still communicate with gun 9. From them he ascertained the extent of the Japanese invasion. At 0400 Platt had lost contact with gun 9 and he set out from his CP to personally assess the situation.[45] He moved along the beach until he came to gun 10. Captain Platt assessed the situation and made one of those bold and audacious decisions that so often tilt the balance in war, he would counter-attack.

Without hesitation Captain Platt gathered eight men, two machine guns and set off to attack an enemy force that outnumbered him ten to one. They moved quietly through the thick brush and got within fifty yards of the enemy positions. In textbook fashion, Captain Platt placed his machine guns on the flanks to suppress the enemy.[46]

On order the two machine guns opened up and Captain Platt led the attack into the Japanese position. At the

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[45]Ibid., 144.

[46]Heinl, 55.

same time the handmaiden of boldness, luck, intervened. On the opposite side of the Japanese perimeter Lieutenant McCalister and Gunner McKinstry began engaging the Japanese. Not expecting an attack from the west, the Japanese had oriented their light machine guns to the east. Captain Platt's assault panicked the enemy and his force quickly retook the 3-inch battery position. Simultaneously and without coordination McCalister and McKinstry attacked the eastern side of the perimeter.

The two forces linked up and began clearing the enemy's positions.[47] Captain Platt ordered the enemy flags taken down, unfortunately, as it turned out, this action was too late. Captain Platt then reorganized his forces in preparation of further enemy attacks. Wilkes was secure.

As Captain Platt was making his fateful decision on Wilkes, the situation on Wake was getting grimmer. Major Devereux still could not communicate with his units and as dawn was breaking he could see Japanese flags scattered across the island marking the extent of the enemies advance.

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[47]Records differ on the number of Japanese casualties. Heinl and the Marine Corps put the number at 90, Platt estimates between 75-85. Japanese records report 3 officers and 55 enlisted. The Marines lost 5 dead.

In particular Wilkes appeared to be covered by flags.[48] In the growing light, he observed warships surrounded the island. Major Devereux ordered his executive officer, Major George H. Potter, to take the reserve and form a defensive line south of the main CP. He then ordered Captain Bryghte D. Goldbold, commander Battery D, to bring his men to the Command Post. Devereux had committed the last of his available men.[49]

With the coming light the enemy became more active. The warships had continuously bombarded the Marine positions while maintaining a respectable distance from the coastal batteries. Now three destroyers passed near Battery B (5-inch) on Peale apparently in route to Wilkes.[50] First Lieutenant Woodrow W. Kessler opened fire on the lead destroyer and scored hits after four volleys. In a replay of 11 December, the destroyers made smoke and quickly departed. For its efforts Battery B received the attention of the Japanese dive bombers.

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[48]Devereux asserts he was never notified that the flags on Wilkes had come down.

[49]Heinl, 50.

[50]Hough, et al., 143.

Aircraft from Carrier Division 8 had been waiting for daylight to make their contribution to the invasion. Now they began attacking any area that looked like a Marine position. Battery F (3-inch), the only operational anti-aircraft guns, opened fire with little effect.

On land the enemy was taking advantage of the thick underbrush to infiltrate around the Marines. They were establishing an assembly area east of the airfield for the final push to clear the rest of the island. With air and naval gunfire support, the enemy began advancing.

Major Potter finally assembled what amounted to a rifle platoon. His force was inadequate to stretch across the entire length of the island, 850 yards at this point.[51] There remained a 450-yard gap between his position and Battery E (3-inch). Both positions began receiving mortar and machine gun fire.

Major Devereux assessed the situation: apparently Wilkes had fallen, he could not communicate with his units, he had no more reserves to commit, the enemy was advancing on his CP and Japanese aircraft were striking at will.[52] He

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[51]Heinl, 52.

[52]Earlier Devereux had received a report from a

contacted Commander Cunningham and informed him of the situation. Then came one of the hardest events for both men.

Cunningham asked Devereux if he would be justified in surrendering for humanitarian reasons. Devereux evaded the question and deferred the decision to the commander. When informed that no help would be coming, Devereux succumbed to the inevitable decision. At 0700 Commander Cunningham authorized Major Devereux to surrender the Island.[53]

Major Devereux first passed the word to Batteries A (5-inch), B (5-inch) and E (3-inch) these were the units he could communicate with.[54] All units were ordered to destroy their equipment as best they could.[55] He then rigged a white flag and set out on his distasteful task.

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distraught civilian that the Japanese were bayoneting the Marines at Camp One. This was surely on his mind as well.

[53]Both men, in their books, admit the agony over the decision to surrender. Devereux states that surrender never occurred to him however, in fairness to Cunningham he admits the decision was "beyond argument."

[54]Heinl, 58.

[55]Some were very thorough, one battery commander fired twenty .45-caliber rounds into his electronic equipment. Battery E (3-inch) gunners stuffed blankets into the tubes and fired a round then they rolled hand grenades down the tubes to complete the job.

On his way to the hospital, a Japanese soldier who relieved them of their weapons and helmets stopped Devereux and his group.[56] The group continued on their way. At the hospital, which had been transferred into two empty ammunition bunkers, Devereux found the wounded outside bound at their hands and necks. At this same time, Commander Cunningham arrived after having changed into his dress blue uniform. Devereux left Cunningham to work out the formalities of the surrender and continued on to the airfield.

Lieutenant Hanna and the men of VMF 211 were still defending the 3-inch gun when Devereux ordered them to surrender. They had held their position for six hours and all but one of the men had been killed or wounded.[57]

Next Devereux came upon Lieutenant Kliewer and his three men. They were still trying to get the generator working so they could crater the airfield. As Devereux approached he told them to surrender. One of the Marines advised Lieutenant Kliewer: "Don't surrender, Lieutenant.

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[56]Heinl, 58.

[57]Hough, et al., 148.

Marines never surrender. It's a hoax."[58] Lieutenant Kliewer realized the situation was hopeless and surrendered his band.

At 1115 the surrender party met Lieutenant Poindexter on the road west of the airstrip. Unbeknownst to Devereux, Lieutenant Poindexter had conducted a counter-attack and had regained the lost ground between Camp One and the airfield.

Around 0900 Lieutenant Poindexter realized he had the situation at Camp One in hand and went on the offensive. He organized his men into three ten-man squads. During a series of sharp firefights he reached the road junction west of the airfield. This is where Lieutenant Poindexter met Major Devereux and turned over his men.

At this point it was probably becoming obvious to Major Devereux that situation on the island was not as bad as he had informed Commander Cunningham. If that were disheartening the news would be worse when the surrender party reached Wilkes.

By 0800 the marines on Wilkes had completed their reorganization and Captain Platt ordered the gunners of

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[58]Heinl, 59.

Battery L (5-inch) back to their guns. The gunners found both guns inoperative. One would not track and the others recoil mechanism was damaged.[59] Platt reformed his men as infantryman.[60] Receiving word of landing boats approaching Wake near the channel he moved off with his force to repel the attack.[61]

The approaching craft were carrying Major Devereux and the surrender party. Devereux noticed "a few grubby, dirty men who came out of the brush with their rifles ready."[62] Reluctantly Captain Platt and his men surrendered.

By 1400 all resistance on Wake Island ceased.[63] In 11 hours the Japanese had avenged the defeat and loss of face of 11 December.

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[59]Cressman, 226.

[60]Captain Platt interrogated one of the wounded Japanese and learned that no further landings were planned for Wilkes.

[61]In route the force was attacked by dive bombers, one Marine was killed the last casualty in the fighting for Wake Island. Interestingly the first casualty had also been sustained on Wilkes.

[62]Devereux, 195.

[63]The defenders would remain on the island until January 12 when they were shipped out to prisoner of war camps. 100 of the civilians were kept on the island to complete work on the Naval Air Station. They were summarily executed in 1943 when the commander of the island suspected

Japanese losses for the entire fifteen-day battle may never be accurately known, but they are recorded as:

1. Over 1,000 soldiers
2. Four warships sunk eight more damaged
3. Twenty-one aircraft shot down

For the defenders the losses were: 58 Marines, 11 Sailors and an undetermined number of civilians.[64]

1. Twelve aircraft
2. Six 5-inch coastal guns
3. Twelve 3-inch antiaircraft guns

The biggest gain by this "magnificent fight" was the psychological boost it gave the American people following Pearl Harbor. But the question remains could the defenders of Wake Island been relieved.

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the Americans were going to invade.

[64]Sources place the number of civilian casualties between 33-80.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RACE FOR WAKE

As the Japanese Task Force limped away from Wake Island on 11 December, the CINCPAC staff had already begun planning the reinforcement of the Island. The news of the Japanese defeat lifted the spirits of the staff. Kimmel anticipated the defenders had bought him enough time to execute a full-scale relief and strike back at the Japanese.[1]

Early in his command as CINCPAC, Kimmel noted the importance of Wake Island to both the United States and Imperial Japan. His intention was to use Wake Island as bait to lure the Japanese Navy into an ambush.[2] But this plan was based on the fleet being intact and gaining intelligence on the location of the Japanese fleet.[3] After

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[1]Rear Admiral Edwin T. Layton, USN (Ret), Captain Roger Pineau, USNR (Ret), and John Costello, *"And I was There" Pearl Harbor and Midway: Breaking the Secrets* (New York: William, morrow and Company, 1985), 334.

[2]Captain Edward L. Beach, USN (Ret), *Scapegoats: A Defense of Husband E. Kimmel and Walter C. Short at Pearl Harbor* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 105.

[3]This was essentially the way Admiral Chester Nimitz would use Midway in June 1942 when the Imperial Japanese Navy lost four carriers.

7 December, Kimmel had neither. However, Kimmel was a fighter and desperate to strike back at the enemy whereever he could.

Following the raid on Pearl Harbor Admiral Stark, the Chief of Naval Operations, cabled Kimmel with the two options he saw for Wake Island: (1) Reinforce the defenders with Marines, aircraft, and a radar set; and (2) Evacuate all personnel after destroying the equipment.

Kimmel saw a third: abandon the defenders to their fate that he did not communicate to Stark and he quickly rejected.[4] Admiral Stark left it to Kimmel's discretion to reinforce, resupply, or evacuate both Wake Island and Midway.[5] He informed the CNO that he intended to reinforce Wake and evacuate 700 civilians.[6] There was still hope that the remaining civilians could complete work on the Naval Air Station.[7] The CNO "heartily concurred."[8]

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[4]Robert J. Cressman, *The Battle for Wake Island: A Magnificent Fight* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 152

[5]Ibid., 152.

[6]Ibid., 152.

[7]W. Scott Cunningham with Lydel Sims, *Wake Island Command* (Boston: Little Brown, 1961). During the early stages of the battle Commander Cunningham received numerous

On 9 December Kimmel ordered his staff to begin planning the reinforcement of Wake Island. Generally, the staff supported the plan but there were a few dissenting voices. Many shared Rear Admiral Milo Draemel's view that Wake Island was of secondary importance and Japanese forces would eventually seize the island.[9] Kimmel overrode these concerns and planning went ahead.

Conspicuously missing from these discussions is any mention of the prewar plan to use Wake as bait. This was probably due to two factors. First there was no hard intelligence on the location the Japanese fleet. Nagumo's task force disappeared as stealthily as it had appeared. Secondly, and this is not stated by anyone, after the Japanese raid a certain amount of cautiousness infected the commander and staff, understandably, given the heart of the Pacific Fleet was destroyed. They were reminded of this

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messages concerning the status of work on the Air Station. At one point a frustrated Cunningham replied that at the moment all hands were preoccupied.

[8]Stephen D. Regan, *In Bitter Tempest: The Biography of Admiral Frank Jack Fletcher* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State university Press, 1994), 76.

[9]Ibid., 74.

fact every time they looked out over the harbor. This cautiousness will become decisive in the race for Wake Island. But for the present the staff turned their efforts to reinforcing the Wake defenders.

Kimmel divided his carriers into three task force. Task Force 8 was formed around *Enterprise* and was commanded by Admiral William Halsey. Vice Admiral Wilson Brown commanded Task Force 11 formed around *Lexington*. Task Force 14, formed around *Saratoga,* was given the mission to deliver reinforcements and evacuate the civilians. In addition to the carriers each task force would have two to three cruisers and several destroyers. These meager forces only highlighted the crippled state of the Pacific Fleet.

Command of Task Force 14 would go to Admiral Frank Fletcher. Admiral Fletcher would find himself at the center of the relief controversy beginning with his selection to command this task force. Admiral Aubrey Fitch was expected to command Task Force 14. Fitch was one of the most experienced aviators in the Navy. Fletcher on the other hand had spent his career in cruisers. He was, however, senior to Fitch, Kimmel based his selection on that

criteria.[10] Fletcher's lack of experience with naval aviation would be one of the accusations leveled at him after the recall.

Kimmel's plan called for Task Force 11 to raid Jaluit to tie down Japanese forces while Task Force 8 would protect the approaches to Oahu. Task Force 14 would move to a point off of Wake Island and fly off the Marine squadron embarked on *Saratoga*.[11] Meanwhile, a converted seaplane tender, *Tangier,* would make a dash for the island to deliver reinforcements and evacuate the civilians.

It is interesting to note Kimmel's assignment of missions. Admiral Brown commanding Task Force 11 was unsure of the utility of the mission and was concerned about exposing his force to shore based aircraft. Next Kimmel assigns the key carrier task force to an Admiral without experience handling carriers. This is not meant to denigrate Fletcher who had an outstanding reputation as a sailor. But did Fletcher understand the flexibility and

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[10]Kimmel was sensitive to the fact that he had been jumped over several senior officers to command the Pacific Fleet.

[11]These would be F2A Brewster Buffaloes of VMF 221. VMF 211 and 221 were from the same Marine Air Group adding to the Marines desire to help their friends.

aggressiveness required of fast carrier operations? The man who did have that understanding was William Halsey.

Halsey was arguably Kimmel's most aggressive and dependable commander but he was given essentially a defensive mission. Perhaps Kimmel believed it more important to protect the Hawaiian Islands than to reinforce Wake Island. Or with limited intelligence he did not want to blunder into a fight with the Japanese that the aggressive Halsey might instigate.[12] However, nothing would happen until the relief force was organized.

The seaplane tender *Tangier* was selected to deliver the ground reinforcements and take off the civilians. On board, she would carry elements of the Fourth Defense Battalion less their heavy weapons, for example 5-inch and 3-inch guns. They were expected to fall in on the weapons of the defenders. But they were bringing essential items such as spare parts and range finders for the firing batteries. Additionally, *Tangier* was loaded with the most critical piece of equipment, a radar set. This Force would be under

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[12]Later in the war Halsey's aggressiveness almost led to disaster in the Philippine Sea when he abandoned the invasion force to chase after a Japanese force.

the command of Marine Colonel Harold S. Fassett. He would assume command of the island once ashore.[13]

First *Tangier* would have to be downloaded and prepared for the relief operation. The crew and Marines worked feverishly to load out *Tangier*. By their efforts they had *Tangier* ready by 14 December. Unfortunately, *Saratoga* did not arrive until the next and she would have to be resupplied.

After the defenders successfully repelled the first Japanese assault on 11 December (10 December Pearl Harbor time) interest in the relief of Wake Island picked up. Rear Admiral Claude C. Bloch, commander 14th naval District, informed the Chief of Naval Operations that "Kimmel is doing his best to devise means for reinforcing it [Wake Island] and getting out the civilians."[14] Kimmel further informed Stark, "Marines on hearing of attacks on Midway and Wake have insisted on being sent there."[15]

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[13]Cressman, 148.

[14]Ibid., 142, quoting letter from Bloch to Stark, 12 December 1941, Box 4, Bloch Papers.

[15]Ibid., 142, quoting letter from Kimmel to Stark, 12 December 1941, Hearings before the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack.

On 11 December (12 December on Wake Island) Kimmel received a visitor who would have a profound impact on the Wake Island relief effort and Kimmel himself. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox arrived on a fact-finding mission.[16] His mission was to gather information on the status of the Pacific Fleet and to attempt to fix blame for the Pearl Harbor fiasco. He was only in Hawaii for thirty-six hours but was shocked by the destruction he saw. Before he departs, Kimmel's staff briefs him on the Wake Island relief operation. Knox approved the plan and returned to Washington. His report would have a serious impact on the upcoming battle.

Kimmel saw Secretary Knox off and continued to finalize his plans for Wake Island. Meanwhile the Japanese were setting about their own plans to avenge their previous defeat.

After the defeat of 11 December, Admiral Yamamoto's Chief of Staff, Admiral Matome Ugaki, called Wake Island "the greatest challenge the Imperial Japanese Navy yet

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[16]Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill book Company, 1981), 584.

faced."[17] But the defeat can be traced directly to Japanese over-confidence.

Up to this point Imperial Japanese forces had not known defeat. Why should a little band of United States Marines have posed a threat? According to Japanese pre-war Battle plans, Fourth Fleet, responsible for seizing Wake Island, was simply ordered to "Capture Wake."[18] All that was needed was a few days aerial bombardment and the island would ready to be occupied. Their tactics showed they anticipated little opposition.[19] Apparently the idea of an opposed landing was assumed away.

After the setback on 11 December the Japanese would not be so cavalier about attacking defended islands. The Japanese did not have to seize Wake Island. They ccould have written off Wake Island and starved out the garrison. This was not feasible for two reasons. First, the Japanese

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[17]Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Last Kamikaze: The Story of Admiral Matome Ugaki* (Westport, CT: Preager publishers, 1993), 35.

[18]*The Pearl Harbor Papers: Inside the Japanese Plans*, ed. Donald V. Goldstein and Katharine J. Dillon (New York: Brassey's, 1993), 108.

[19]Paul A. Dull, *A Battle History of the Imperial Japanese Navy (1941-1945)* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1978), 24.

still wanted Wake Island for its strategic importance, and second they had to seize the island to save face.

Admiral Kajioka began requesting reinforcements to support his second assault. Top of his list was carrier air support. The naval staff was at first reluctant to provide carrier support, they had their own plans.[20] The staff finally relented and diverted Carrier Division 2 to support him with the warning that the carriers only had enough fuel for one attack. Yamamoto overrode his staff and authorized Carrier Division 2 to remain on station until Wake Island was captured.[21]

The reinforcements to the assault force and support force have already been discussed in chapter three. Suffice it to say that the Japanese surface fleet alone would have posed a serious threat to the meager American relief effort.

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[20]Edwin P. Hoyt, *Yamamoto: The Man Who Planned Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 138-139. The Japanese Naval staff had planned raids on Midway that had to be cancelled in order to reinforce the Fourth Fleet.

[21]Carrier Division 2 was under the command of Admiral Yamaguchi a flamboyant aggressive warrior who never avoided a fight. If Halsey had commanded Task Force 14 there might surely have been a battle if these two had found each other.

Admiral Kajioka received all the reinforcements he requested but he was essentially demoted. He would still command the assault force but command of the reinforcement operation was given to Rear admiral Abe Hiroaki the commander of Cruiser Division 8.[22] After preparations were complete the Japanese force sailed from Truk on 21 December. The race for Wake Island was on.

However the U. S. Fleet was handicapping itself. *Saratoga* sailed from San Diego on 8 December but was slowed by rough seas. As a portent of things to come, Task Force 11 was having similar problems west of Hawaii trying to refuel. *Saratoga* finally arrives at Pearl Harbor on 14 December but must replenish and make preparations to take on VMF 221.

Kimmel's staff estimated it would take Task Force 14 six and one-half days to transit the 2,000 miles to Wake Island. Their planning was based on the speed of the slowest ship in the task force. This would be the tanker *Neches* with a top speed of 12.75 knots.[23] What they failed

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[22]Cressman, 158.

[23]Regan, 75.

to anticipate was the need for the task force to zigzag as an antisubmarine measure, or, more importantly, the timing of the refueling of the smaller destroyers. If ships of Task Force 11 were having problems refueling in rough seas then it was possible that Task Force 14 may have the same difficulty. But the operation proceeded.

On 15 December Kimmel issued Operation Order 39-41, the plan to relieve Wake Island. The Operation Order is a clear and concise document. It is only seven page long but contains a lot of coordination type information. There is only one assumption that Wake Island would not have fallen before Task Force 14 arrives. Significantly missing is guidance if contact is made with a Japanese force. With the limited forces available this guidance may have eliminated indecision later.

Kimmel decided to sortie the support vessels of Task force 14 on 15 December while *Saratoga* finished preparations. The faster *Saratoga* would depart with her escorts the next day and link-up with the support ships on 17 December. D day for the relief of Wake Island was planned for 1030 23 December, Pearl Harbor time. *Tangier* with her load of supplies and eager Marines pulled out of

Pearl Harbor on 15 December with the mission "to deliver supplies and aircraft to and evacuate wounded and a portion of the civilians from, Wake Island."[24] Unfortunately, this was also the day that Carrier Division 2 and Cruiser Division 8 were detached from Admiral Nagumo to support Fourth Fleet.[25]

On the evening of 16 December *Saratoga* and her escorts sortied from Pearl Harbor. The next day she rendezvoused with her support ships and Task Force 14 began its twelve-knot an hour trek to Wake Island. Based on the staff estimates Fletcher's force would begin relief and reinforcement operations on 24 December, Wake time. As events borne out that was an achievable if optimistic estimate.

The defenders on Wake Island may have bought Admiral Kimmel time to strike at the enemy and salvage his reputation, but events in Washington were moving faster. Navy Secretary Frank Knox completed his inspection of Pearl Harbor on 12 December. Before leaving he had approved the

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[24]*Operation Order No. 39-41* dated 15 December 1941.

[25]Cressman, 152.

plan to relive Wake Island. On his return flight to Washington he reasoned he had two conflicting demands. One was to strike at the enemy, which Kimmel's plan would accomplish. Second, there had to be an accounting for the debacle at Pearl Harbor and the logical course of action was to relieve Kimmel. However, Knox realized that relieving Kimmel would jeopardize the Wake operation. Knox came to the conclusion that Kimmel had to go in order to protect the administration. Knox met immediately with President Roosevelt upon arrival in Washington. He presented his findings and shortly thereafter the decision was made to relieve Kimmel.[26]

Understandably, Kimmel was devastated by the decision both personally and professionally. Personally it was an embarrassment. Professionally it said he had been found wanting at a time of crisis. But more importantly to the story of Wake Island, Kimmel "did not want to be relieved in the middle of an operation he had set in motion."[27] As the situation developed, if Kimmel had remained in command for

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[26]Layton, Pineau, and Costello, 330-333.

[27]Cressman, 102.

one more week the Battle of Wake Island may have a different ending.

Admiral Chester A. Nimitz was named to replace Kimmel. Nimitz was coming from the Bureau of Navigation and was highly respected throughout the Navy. However, it would be a week before he could get out to Pearl Harbor. Admiral Pye, who was the commander of *California,* would fill in as temporary CINC until Nimitz arrived. On December 17th Pye met Kimmel in the latter's office, each read their orders, shook hands, and Kimmel left.[28]

Admiral Pye was placed in an unenviable position. He was given temporary responsibility for a crippled fleet in the middle of a risky offensive operation. An operation that he had not planned and one he did not whole-heartedly support. It is understandable that he would have doubts about the wisdom of the Wake Island relief effort.[29] He had witnessed the Navy's most crushing defeat in history and saw his commander relieved because of this defeat. Now, he was

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[28]Gordon W. Prange, *At Dawn We Slept: The Untold Story of Pearl Harbor* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1981), 590.

[29]Regan, 76.

responsible for what was left of the fleet. He did not want to be in the position of handing the incoming commander a list of new casualties if the Wake operation failed.[30] The will to see Wake Island relieved was beginning to breakdown.

After relieving Kimmel, Pye continued to use his own staff from *California*.[31] This obviously led to friction and confusion in the control of the Wake Island operation if not the day-to-day operations on CINCPAC. It was only natural that Pye would use the personnel he was comfortable with but how informed were they on the relief operation and other operations.

Pye informed the commanders at sea of the relief of Kimmel and left standing orders in place. Task Force 14 continued on to Wake Island, Task Force 8 was still in port scheduled to sortie on 19 December to protect Oahu, and Task Force 11 headed on its way to strike Jaluit. Admiral Brown commanding Task Force 11 was beginning to have grave concerns about his mission.

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[30]Captain Layton, Kimmel's and later Nimitz's intelligence officer believed Pye's confidence and decisiveness was shaken by the Japanese attack.

[31]Layton, Pineau, and Costello, 339.

On 17 December, Admiral Brown was informed that the majority of his anti-aircraft ammunition was defective.[32] Brown became worried about his ability to operate in range of land based aircraft with defective ammunition. To him "a crippled ship...[is]a lost ship."[33] In other words, that under the current circumstances it would be impossible to recover damaged ships.

The seventeenth of December was a pivotal day for Wake Island for another reason. CINCPAC received intercepts that Nagumo was ordered to detach Carrier Division 2 to support the second attack on Wake Island.[34] This sent a wave of doubt through CINCPAC beginning with Pye.

Admiral Pye had the staff reassesed the situation based on this new information. The general consensus was to continue the operations. However, Pye's Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral Milo F. Draemel, recommended that Task Force 11 be diverted to support Task Force 14.[35] This move would concentrate two carriers in the area. Pye concurred and

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[32]Cressman, 183.

[33]Ibid., 182.

[34]Regan, 78.

[35]Ibid., 78.

ordered Admiral Brown to move to link-up with Fletcher. However, in order to insure the link-up happened, Pye ordered Fletcher to slow down to give Brown time to catch up.[36] In addition, Pye ordered Fletcher not close within 200 miles of Wake Island.[37]

This order suited both Fletcher and Brown. Brown could move ships away from the threat of land-based aviation, and Fletcher could refuel his force.

Admiral Fletcher was already becoming concerned about the fuel consumption of his ships.[38] Fletcher wanted to time the refueling of his destroyers so they would be topped off prior to making the run into Wake.

At this time support for the relief of Wake appears positive if not compelling. Admiral Pye dispatched a Catalina patrol plane to Wake Island to inform Commander Cunningham to prepare to receive reinforcements and evacuate a majority of the civilian workers. The Catalina arrived on

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[36]Ibid., 78.

[37]Cressman, 183.

[38]Regan, 77. His destroyers were consuming 300 barrels a day 12 knots and would consume 870 barrels a day at 25 knots.

Wake 20 December, Wake time, boosting the morale of the defenders.

Unfortunately, in one of those quirks of fate the human element intervened. The Catalina crew had broadcast hourly weather reports on their flight from Midway. Japanese intelligence intercepted these reports and anticipating that Wake Island was being reinforced ordered Carrier Division 2 to increase speed and attack earlier than planned.[39] Contrast the Japanese reaction to this information to the American reaction when informed of Carrier Division 2's movements, and it is apparent the Japanese had the initiative and psychological advantage.

The efficient patrol plane crew departed Wake Island 21 December. After returning to Pearl Harbor they were debriefed at CINCPAC headquarters. They painted a desperate picture of the island's defense. Based on the facts presented by the Catalina crew, the staff urged Pye not to give up the relief attempt. Pye concurred and later would recall, "The situation at Wake seemed to warrant taking a greater chance...even at the...possible damage to major

[39]Cressman, 176.

ships of Task Force 14."[40] This was in hindsight, during the crisis he did not seem willing to take a "greater chance." However, he did free Fletcher from the 200-mile restriction and authorized *Tangier* to make a high speed run towards Wake Island.

Hours after the patrol plane left Wake Island, the planes from Carrier Division 2 struck. Word of this attack sent another wave of doubt rippling through CINCPAC. Pye was now concerned he was sending his ships into an ambush.[41] However, there had not been any indications that the Japanese were aware that Task Force 14 or any US force was in the area. It may have still been possible to make a fast run in to Wake Island and catch the invasion force as it was unloading. This would have taken a large measure of boldness and risk that seemed to be lacking at CINCPAC and at sea.

On the morning of 22 December, Task Force 14 was 515 miles from Wake Island (figure 7). Admiral Fletcher, assuming he could find himself in combat at some time the

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[40]Ibid., 190.

[41]Layton, Pineau, and Costello, 340-341.

next day decided it was time to refuel his destroyers. Refueling at sea is a time consuming and perilous task under optimal conditions made more difficult by rough seas. Several times the lines parted and the process begun again. At one point the operation was stopped because of a false report of a submarine approaching the task force. Eventually, the conditions forced the ships to reduce speed to seven knots and turn northeast, away from Wake Island. After ten hours of time consuming effort, four destroyers were topped off. Fletcher called off the operation and decided to finish fueling on 23 December.[42]

This decision was the starting point for the criticism of Fletcher for his actions during this operation. His destroyers were one-half to three-quarter full. It has been argued, based on the reports coming out of Wake Island, that he should have cut loose *Neches* and made a high speed run toward Wake. This was the bold and audacious course of action like Captain Platt gathering eight Marines and two machine guns to attack the Japanese on Wilkes. However, Admirals are paid to be bold but not rash and Frank Fletcher

[42]Cressman, 189-190.

was not a rash man. He weighed all the factors, he could be in combat the next day, his destroyers would burn fuel at a faster rate in combat, he was responsible for one of only three carriers in the Pacific, and the location and number of Japanese carriers was unknown. Fletcher made the more prudent decision based on the facts as he knew them.

The Japanese invasion force that had sailed from Truk on 21 December arrived at Wake around midnight of the 22 December. While Admiral Fletcher was unsuccessfully attempting to refuel his ships, Admiral Kajioka's Special Naval Landing Force began loading into their barges. At 0230 the final battle for Wake Island began.

As the invasion began, Commander Cunningham tried to contact the submarines *Triton* and *Tambor* that had been operating in the area. He was hoping to divert them to attack the assault force. Cunningham was unsuccessful in contacting either submarine. He did receive a reply from CINCPAC stating that: "No friendly vessels should be in your immediate vicinity today. Keep me informed."[43] Not the kind of message to inspire confidence in a commander locked

[43]W. Scott Cunningham and Lydel Sims, 124.

in desperate fight and one that would weigh heavily in the decision to surrender the island.

After receiving word of the Japanese landing Pye convened a meeting to discuss for the relief attempt now that enemy forces were ashore. The staff was divided between those who wanted to immediately withdraw Task Force 14 and those who urged that Fletcher increase speed and attack the Japanese.[44] Pye agreed with the latter and issued orders for Fletcher to move in. Pye believed the "offensive spirit" shown by the Navy would be worth any losses.[45]

On the morning of 23 December, Wake time, Task Force was 425 miles from Wake. It would take Fletcher about twelve hours to reach the island. There was a chance he could still catch the invasion force and at inflict some damage on the enemy.

Around 0600 Cunningham radioed CINCPAC that "Enemy on Island. Issue in doubt."[46] This message seems to have

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[44]Regan, 79.

[45]Cressman, 208.

[46]W. Scott Cunningham and Lydel Sims, 133-134. Commander Cunningham states his message was not intended as bravado but was a phrase he recalled from a novel, *Revolt of*

taken some of the "offensive spirit" out of Pye. He now countermanded his first order to Fletcher and ordered him to merely attempt to evacuate the forces on the island. No sooner had this order been sent than Pye received word form Admiral Stark that "Wake is now and will continue to be a liability."[47] This seemed to be the final blow for Pye.

At 0652 Pye received what would be the final message from Commander Cunningham: "Enemy on Island. Several ships plus transports moving in. Two DD [Destroyers] aground." As Pye assessed the situation it did not look good. He had three carrier task forces operating independently. These carriers represented the only offensive capability for the Pacific Fleet. He knew there were at least two Japanese carriers in the area and he had no knowledge of the location of the remainder. Finally, he was only temporarily in command, in a couple of days he would hand the fleet over to Admiral Nimitz. Based on those facts Pye made the decision to recall Task Force 14. It was surely as difficult and

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Angels, that he had read.

[47]John B. Lundstrom, *The First Team: Pacific Naval Air Combat from Pearl Harbor to Midway* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 131.

painful decision as was being made by Cunningham on Wake Island.

At 0911, Pearl Harbor time, word went out to the fleet. Admiral Brown and Admiral Halsey would maneuver to cover the withdrawal of Task Force 14. Reportedly, word went around *Enterprise* that Halsey had to be dissuaded from disobeying orders.[48] Being directly responsible for the relief, the reaction onboard *Saratoga* and throughout Task Force 14 was stronger.

The sailors and Marines of Task Force 14 were understandably upset when the force turned to the northeast away from Wake Island. In particular, the Marines were angry as they perceived the Navy was abandoning their comrades. The small size of the Marine Corps in 1941 meant many Marines of the relief force new someone on Wake Island. And the aviators of VMF 221 flew together with the aviators of VMF 211.

Among the sailors there were those who believed it was Fletcher's duty to disobey the recall order. That he should

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[48]E. B. Potter, *Bull Halsey* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1985) 18.

turn a "blind eye" as Nelson did at Trafalgar.[49] It is reported that the discussion among the bridge staff on *Saratoga* became so mutinous that Admiral Fitch discretely left the bridge.[50]

Pye informed Washington that Wake had fallen with the following dispatch: "The use of offensive action to relieve Wake had been my intention and desire. But when the enemy had once landed on the island, the general strategic situation took precedence, and the conservation of our naval forces became the first consideration. I ordered the retirement with extreme regret."[51] Admiral Stark passed the message on to President Roosevelt. The president prepared an address for the public honoring the heroic stand of the Wake Island defenders but privately rebuked the Navy for its handling of the affair.

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[49]Cressman, 223. However, Nelson had better intelligence since he could see the enemy force.

[50]Ibid., 223, quoting Note on Interview with Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, USN (Ret.), by LtCol Robert D. Heinl on 13 June 1947 in Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, DC. Admiral Fitch stated he "had never seen, in his entire career, such intensive indignation and resentment as was displayed," that day.

[51]Duane Schultz, *Wake Island: The Heroic, Gallant Fight* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 145.

"Remember Wake Island" became a rallying cry for America as the country prepared for war. For fifteen days the defenders of Wake Island showed the world that the Japanese were not invincible and that America would be harder to defeat than the Japanese had planned. A mere six months after the fall of Wake Island, the Navy and the American people would have a stunning victory at the Battle of Midway. Ironically, Admiral Nimitz would use Midway as bait to lure the Japanese Fleet into action, much like Admiral Kimmel had intended to use Wake Island.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Could Wake Island have been relieved? The answer appears to be driven by time frame and point of view. By defeating the Japanese assault on 11 December, the defenders bought time for the Navy to mount a relief effort. By 23 December, when the Japanese mounted the second and successful assault, the situation had changed dramatically. To quote Commander Cunningham, "the issue was in doubt." What was missing was a sense of urgency and the will to see the operation through.

Even prior to 11 December Admiral Kimmel had begun planning to reinforce Wake Island. Operations in the waters off of Wake Island were, after all, part of his pre-war plan to use the island base as bait. But his prewar plan was predicated on an intact fleet and sufficient intelligence to track the movements of the Japanese forces as they entered the trap. The Japanese attack on 7 December left the fleet badly crippled and in the aftermath the location of the Japanese Fleet was unknown.

Still Kimmel possessed the warrior's spirit and wanted to get at the enemy. He organized the relief around his three aircraft carriers, the sole offensive capability he had remaining. However, one, *Saratoga,* was located in San Diego and would require several days sailing before she reached Pearl Harbor. This was the first of many delays that would jeopardize the relief of Wake Island.

Once *Saratoga* reached Pearl Harbor she would have to refuel and take on the Marine relief air squadron. More time lost but the defenders on Wake were doing their part and steadfastly holding on.

The defeat of 11 December was nearly as shocking to the Japanese as their attack on Pearl Harbor had been to the Americans.[1] They evaluated the situation and determined the seizure of Wake Island would need more preparation, not to mention a larger force. This would take time, time for American reinforcements to arrive.

Once again, the Japanese discounted American ability. The thought that the United States would or could reinforce Wake Island does not seem to have been considered. Or they

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[1]Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Last Kamikaze: The Story of Admiral Matome Ugaki* (Westport, CT: Preager publishers, 1993), 35.

may have correctly judged the mental state of the Pacific Fleet leadership following their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.

Kimmel's plan had the support of the Secretary of the Navy and the Chief of Naval Operations. However, it appears there was some doubt in Kimmel's mind on the importance of relieving Wake Island. By placing Admiral Halsey, his most aggressive commander, in charge of protecting the approaches to Hawaii Kimmel signaled where his priority lay, the defense of the Hawaiian Islands. There is also the controversy of putting Admiral Fletcher, a career surface sailor, in charge of carrier task force. And political factors also weighed against Kimmel remaining in command of the Pacific Fleet until the mission was complete. A sense of urgency was being lost.

Admiral Pye as Kimmel's successor was reluctant to risk what remained of the Fleet on what he considered a gamble. He understood his role was merely the interim caretaker of the Pacific Fleet until Admiral Nimitz could arrive. He was also under the psychological stress of seeing the carnage in the harbor on a daily basis. Not to mention his own command, *California,* was on the bottom of the harbor. Pye

was not mentally prepared to make the bold decisions necessary to see the Wake relief through. The will to force the action was lost.

When faced with the intelligence that indicated Wake was being reinforced the Japanese task force was ordered to increase speed. This is most telling when compared with CINCPAC's reaction to the fact that aircraft carrier's were operating off Wake. All task force were given the discretion to exercise caution.

Anytime before 23 December Wake Island could have been relieved. After 23 December it is unlikely reinforcements would have gotten through to the defenders. But, if Fletcher had moved more aggressively toward Wake Island there would have been a fleet action between Task Force 14 and CarDiv2. Out numbered and out gunned the chance of Task Force 14 emerging victorious is open to debate.

With a more timely effort Wake Island could have been relieved but should Wake Island have been relieved? Once again this is a matter of time reference and perspective.

Prior to 23 December there was a moral imperative to make every effort to reinforce or evacuate the personnel on Wake Island. There is a compact between this country and

her soldiers. The citizenry expect every soldier to do his duty to the utmost of his ability. In return the soldier expects his countries full support. To include measures to come to his aid in time of crisis. The defenders of Wake held up their end of the compact against overwhelming odds.[2]

There was also a tactical reason Wake Island should have been relieved. It was an opportunity to strike back at the enemy after the devastating attack on Pearl Harbor. Which also lends itself to morale, another reason Wake Island should have been relieved.

American morale was at an all time low after 7 December. The incredible defense of Wake Island on 11 December gave the American people a much-needed boost. If there had not been any action taken to send help to Wake Island Americans would have been clamoring for the heads of their elected officials. This was another dimension of the political factors at play in the decision to relieve the defenders.

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[2]Corporal Franklin D. Gross, telephone interview with author, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 15 February 1998. Corporal Gross informed the author that the defenders did not dwell on the status of the relief effort. Each of them just did their job.

Admiral Kimmel along with General Short became the targets for the failure of preparedness at Pearl Harbor. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox expressed reservations about relieving Admiral Kimmel while the Wake operation was underway. But he also weighed the political fallout if someone was not held responsible for the disaster and he recommended the relief of Kimmel. Politicians were no more willing to risk their careers than the leadership of the Pacific Fleet were willing to risk their ships.

After the crushing defeat at Pearl Harbor should the naval leadership have risked what remained of the Pacific Fleet to rescue the personnel on Wake Island? The answer to that question has strategic implications.

With the symbol of American naval strength sitting on the bottom of Pearl Harbor the striking power of the Pacific Fleet rested with three aircraft carriers, *Enterprise, Lexington,* and *Saratoga.* Most naval planners, Japanese or American, envisioned any war in the Pacific would culminate with a climactic surface battle between ships of the line. After 7 December America no longer possessed, in the Pacific, the ability to meet the Imperial Japanese Navy in surface battle. Those three carriers, with possible

reinforcement from the Atlantic Fleet, would have to stop Japanese aggression until the United States Navy could recover.

Understandably, caution became the watchword of American naval planners. Kimmel wanted to get at the Japanese, either because of his aggressive nature or, more likely, he had nothing to lose and every thing to gain by rescuing Wake Island. Unfortunately, he became a political casualty before he could see his plan through. Admiral Pye, the interim CINCPAC, was merely the caretaker of the Pacific Fleet until Admiral Nimitz arrived. Therefore, he was in no position to risk anymore of the fleet.

When Pye assumed command the Wake relief effort was just getting started in earnest. He assumed command the same day *Saratoga* sortied for Wake Island. The plan he inherited had his aircraft carriers divided into three task force. Each task force was numerically inferior to any Japanese force they were likely to encounter. To further complicate the matter he lacked firm intelligence as to the location of the Japanese fleet that had struck Pearl Harbor. The last straw was the news that Japanese aircraft carriers were attacking Wake Island.

At that moment he had to weigh the tactical gain by forcing through the Wake Island operation with the strategic loss if any of his aircraft carriers were sunk. Added to this was word from Washington that Wake Island was becoming a liability. This surely signaled to Pye that Wake Island was no longer strategically significant and therefore not worth the risk of any of his valuable ships.

As to Admiral Fletcher turning a "blind eye" and disobeying orders. This would never happen for two reasons, he was too much a good naval officer to even consider such an action and he understood the strategic situation as well as anyone. Douglas MacArthur once said it is the orders you disobey that make you famous. In Fletcher's case the orders he disobeyed could have made him infamous if he had failed.

It appears that recalling the relief force after 23 December made sense strategically. This was going to be a long war and America was already at a disadvantage following Pearl Harbor. The loss of even one aircraft carrier at that early date may have tipped the balance irrevocably in favor of the Japanese. Taking the longer view the correct decision was made to recall the relief force after 23 December.

What America did gain from the defense of Wake Island was a boost to morale during the dark days of December 1941. American forces learned that the Japanese Navy was not invincible. The Japanese learned that the United States was not going to be as easy to defeat as they had anticipated. Finally the defenders of Wake Island, by their resolute defense, slowed the Japanese timetable in the Pacific and in so doing gained time for America to prepare for the long war to come.

Could a situation like Wake Island face this country again? The answer is most definitely. At any given time small detachments and units of U. S. service men and women are scattered about the globe participating in strategically vital operations. Many times these operations are occurring in extremely hostile environments.

These current operations share another significant feature with Wake Island, the presence of civilians. Unlike Wake Island where, other than the PanAir employees, the majority of the civilians were contracted by the government. These are usually volunteers serving with relief organizations. Many of these organizations are international adding another layer to the problem facing a

modern day Cunningham. However, that does lessen the amount of support these organizations, American or international will expect from the United States government in a crisis. As evidenced by several recent NEO's executed by the Navy and Marines.

These same civilians will also influence the decisions of the commander on the ground. Twelve hundred unarmed civilians on Wake Island weighed heavily on Commander Cunningham's decision to surrender his command. We cannot expect any leader today to be any less cognizant of the presence of these noncombatants. And the press will always be there to remind him if he does forget.

Probably the single most significant change from 1941 is the advent of instantaneous news, the "CNN factor." How different might the decisions have been with a news crew on Wake Island photographing and cataloging every aspect of the defense? How much of a liability would the island have been if, daily, the voters could have seen the heroism of the defenders or more poignantly the pathetically weak defenses. It would have been much harder to convince the American people that the recall of the relief force was strategically sound.

However, in the final analysis, the number of civilians or the amount of news coverage cannot have a major impact on strategic decisions. Our leaders will continue to make sound, if difficult, decisions based on the needs of the country. We soldiers would expect nothing less.

While Wake Island may have been a tactical defeat it was a strategic victory. Time was gained to prepare America for a long and costly war. And for a brief moment the morale of the American people was bolstered by the news of the tenacious defense of desolate island by a handful of Americans. As Corporal Franklin D. Gross explained it, the Marines on Wake Island did not consider themselves heroes they were just doing their duty. He further stated that he believed any other group of Marines would have acted in the same manner. In any future conflict any American force, like the Marines on Wake Island, will accept their situation as it is and do their best to execute the mission.

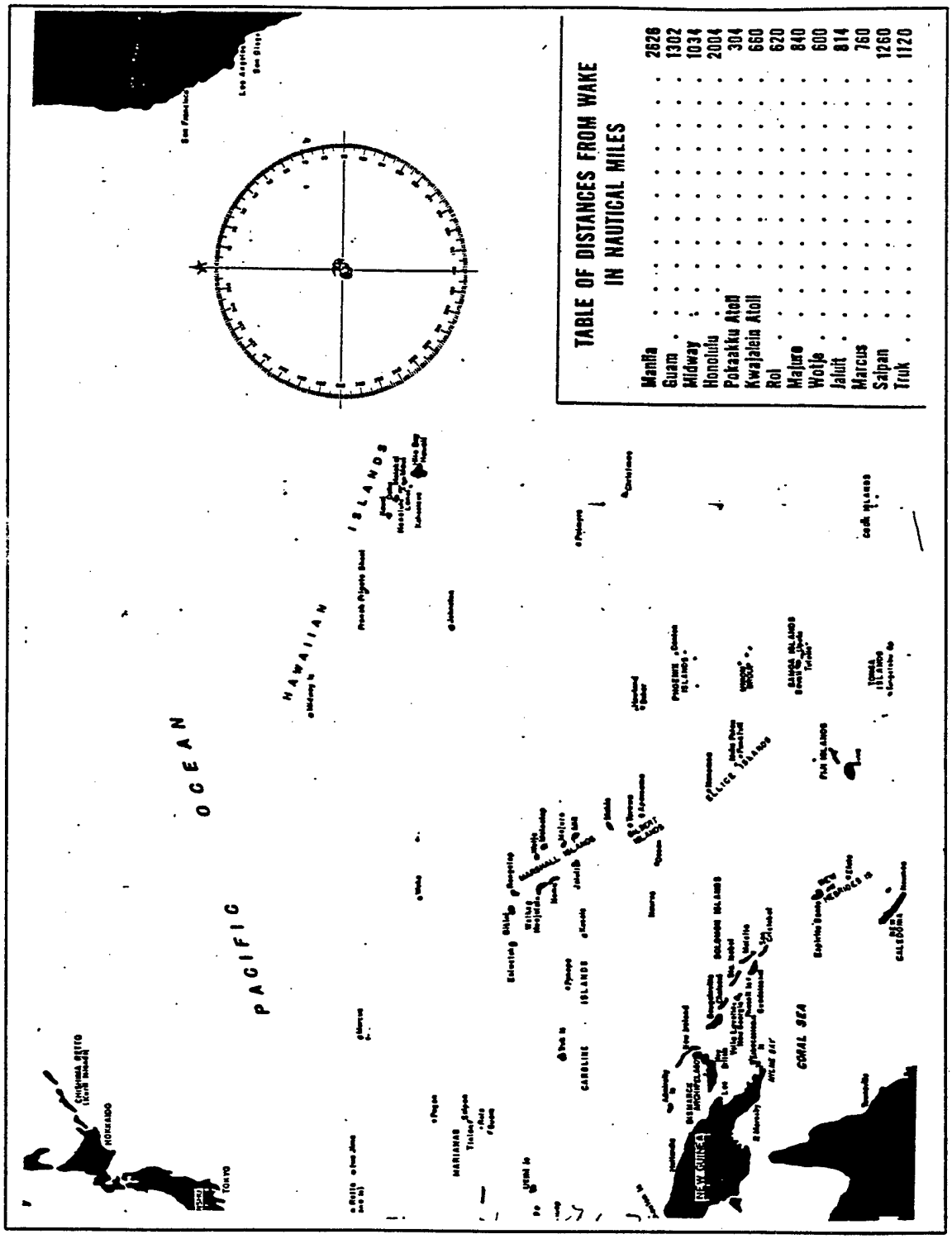

Figure 1. Map of the Pacific Region

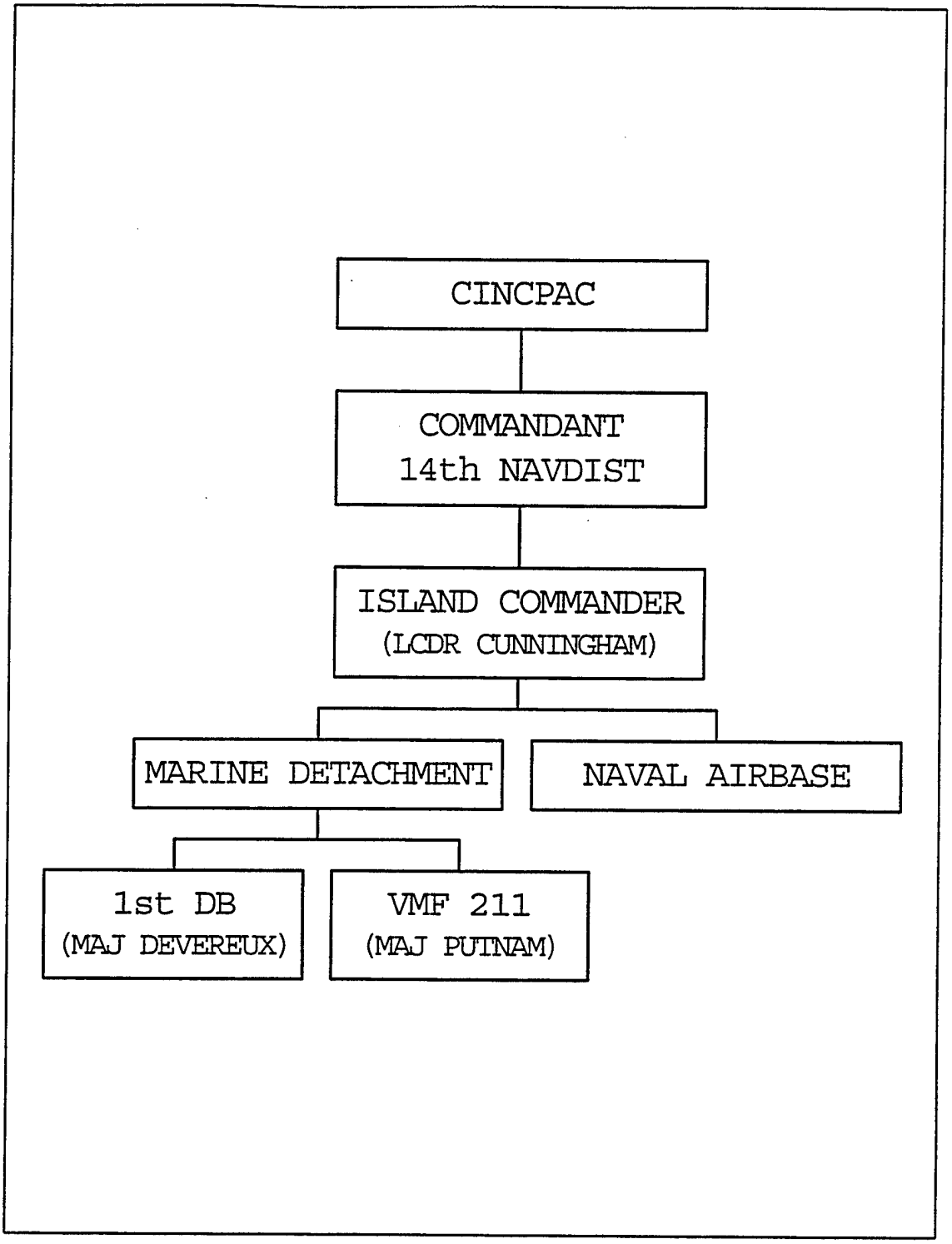

Figure 2. Command Structure of US Forces on Wake Island

1ST DEFENSE BATTALION COMMAND AND STAFF

Commanding Officer.....Major James P. S. Devereux

Executive Officer.....Major George H. Potter

Munitions Officer.....Marine Gunner John Hammas

Ordnance Officer.....Marine Gunner Harold C. Borth

Medical Officer.....Lt.(jg) Gustave M. Kahn, USN

Five Inch Artillery Group

Commanding Officer.....Major George H. Potter

Commanding Officer, Bty A.....1st LT Clarence A. Barninger

Commanding Officer, Bty B.....1st LT Woodrow W. Kesseler

Commanding Officer, BTY L.....2nd LT John A. McAlister

Three Inch Antiaircraft Group

Commanding Officer.....Captain Bryghte D. Goldbold

Commanding Officer, Bty D.....Captain Bryghte D. Goldbold

Commanding officer, Bty E.....1st LT William W. Lewis

Commanding Officer, Bty F.....Marine Gunner C. B. McKinstry

Separate Batteries

Commanding Officer, Bty G.....Captain Wesley M. Platt

Commanding Officer, Bty H.....2nd LT Robert M. Hanna

Commanding Officer, Bty I.....2nd LT Arthur A. Poindexter

Figure 3. 1st Defense Battalion Command and Staff

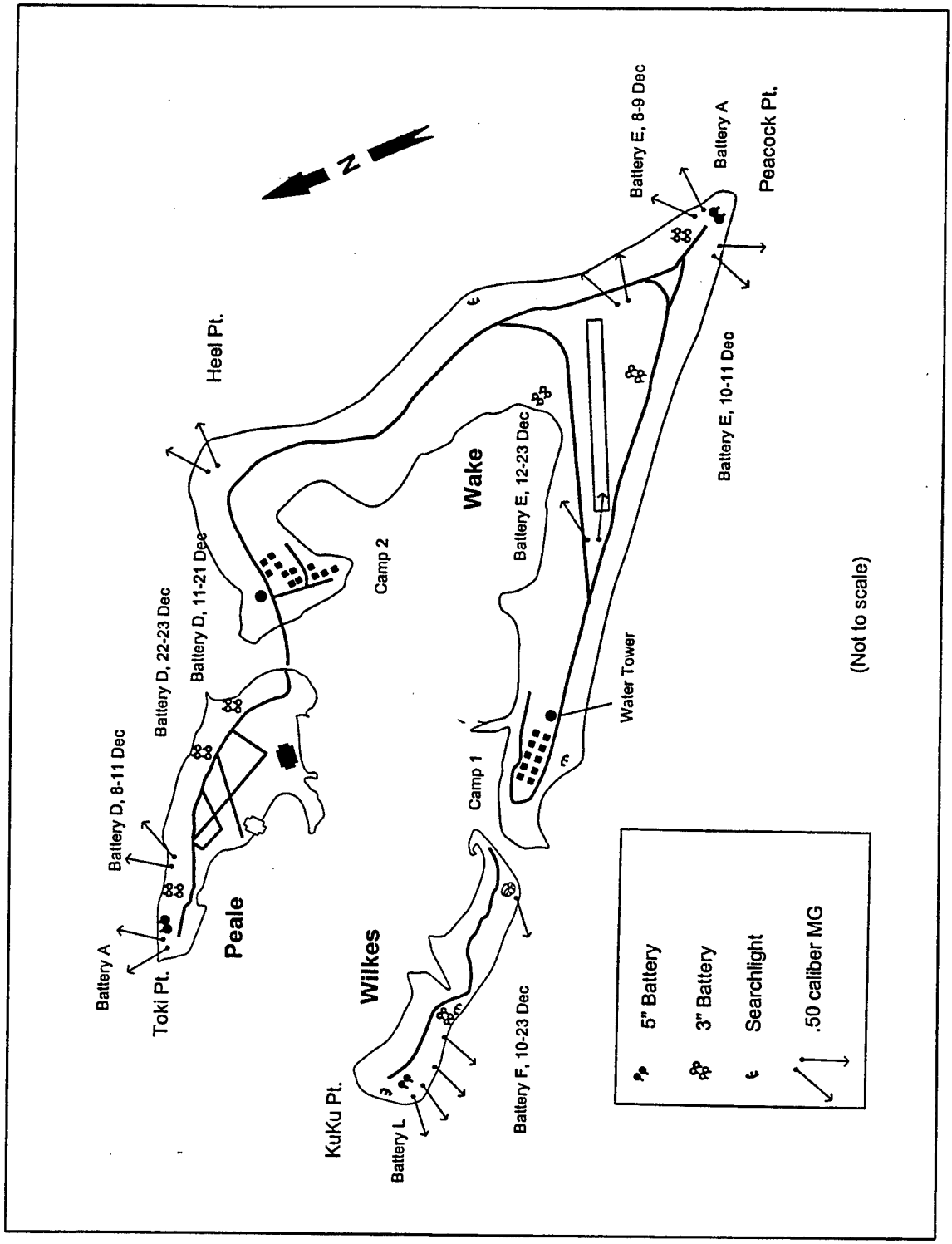

Figure 4. Key Positions on Wake Island

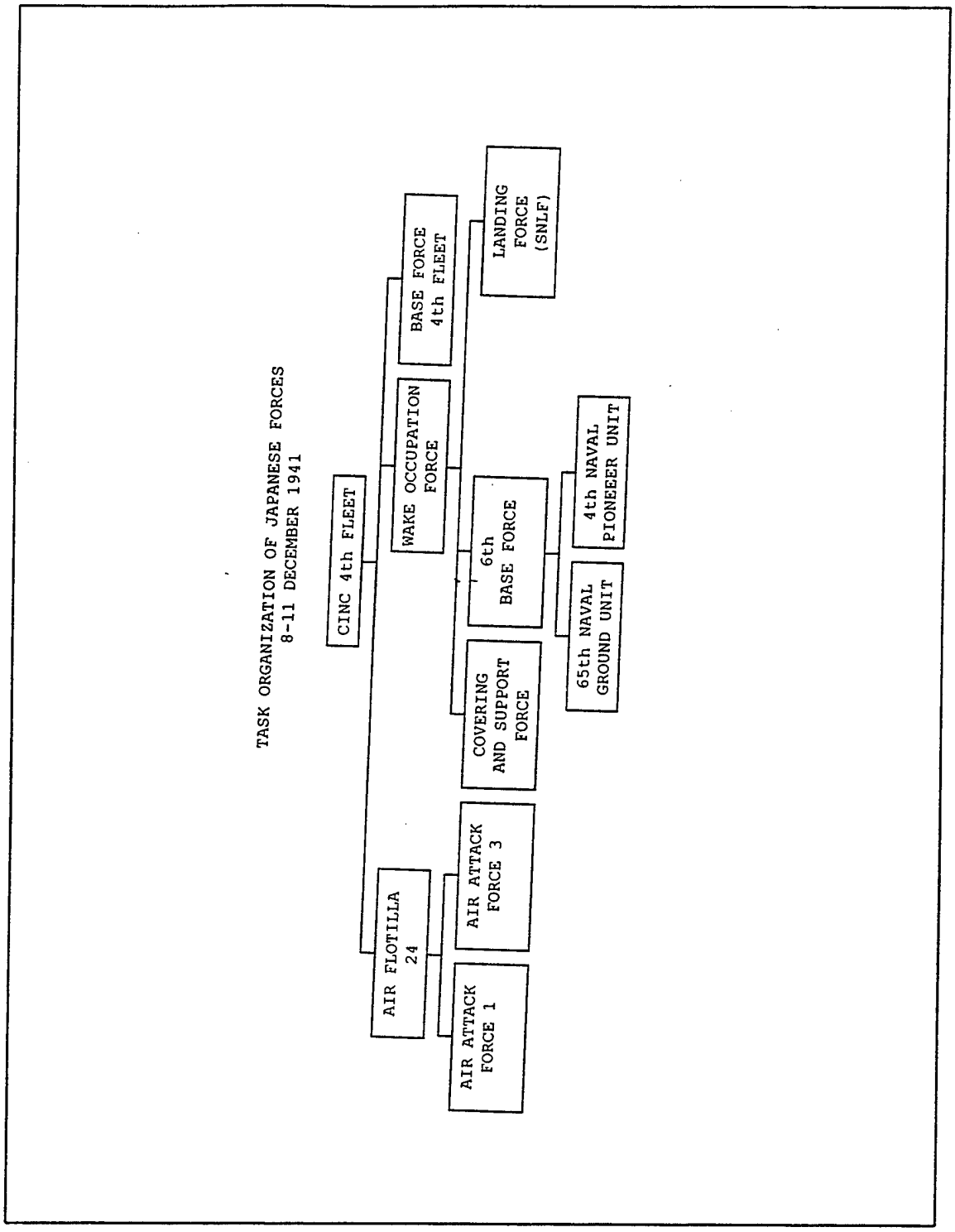

Figure 5. Japanese Task Organization 8-11 December

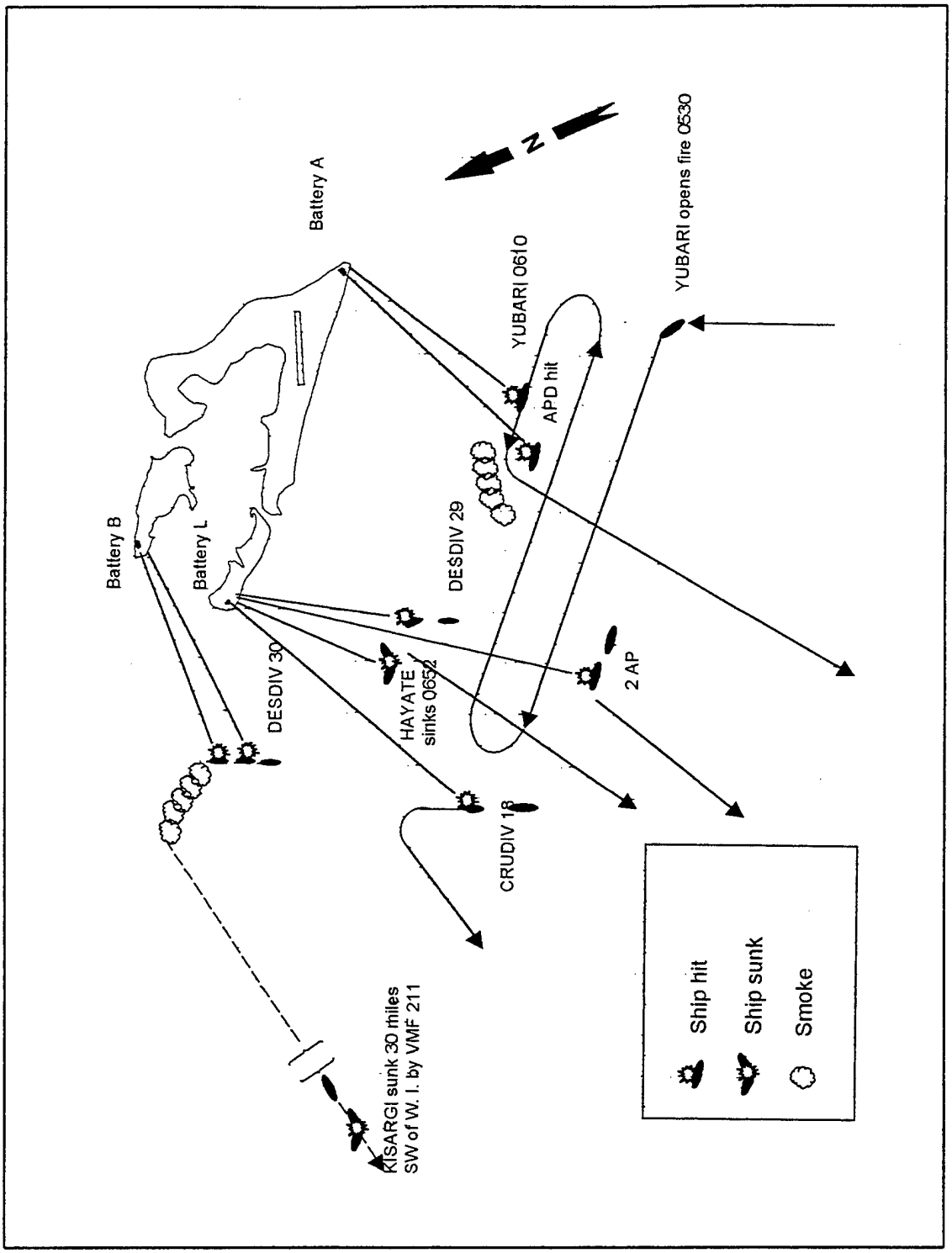

Figure 6. Japanese Assault 11 December

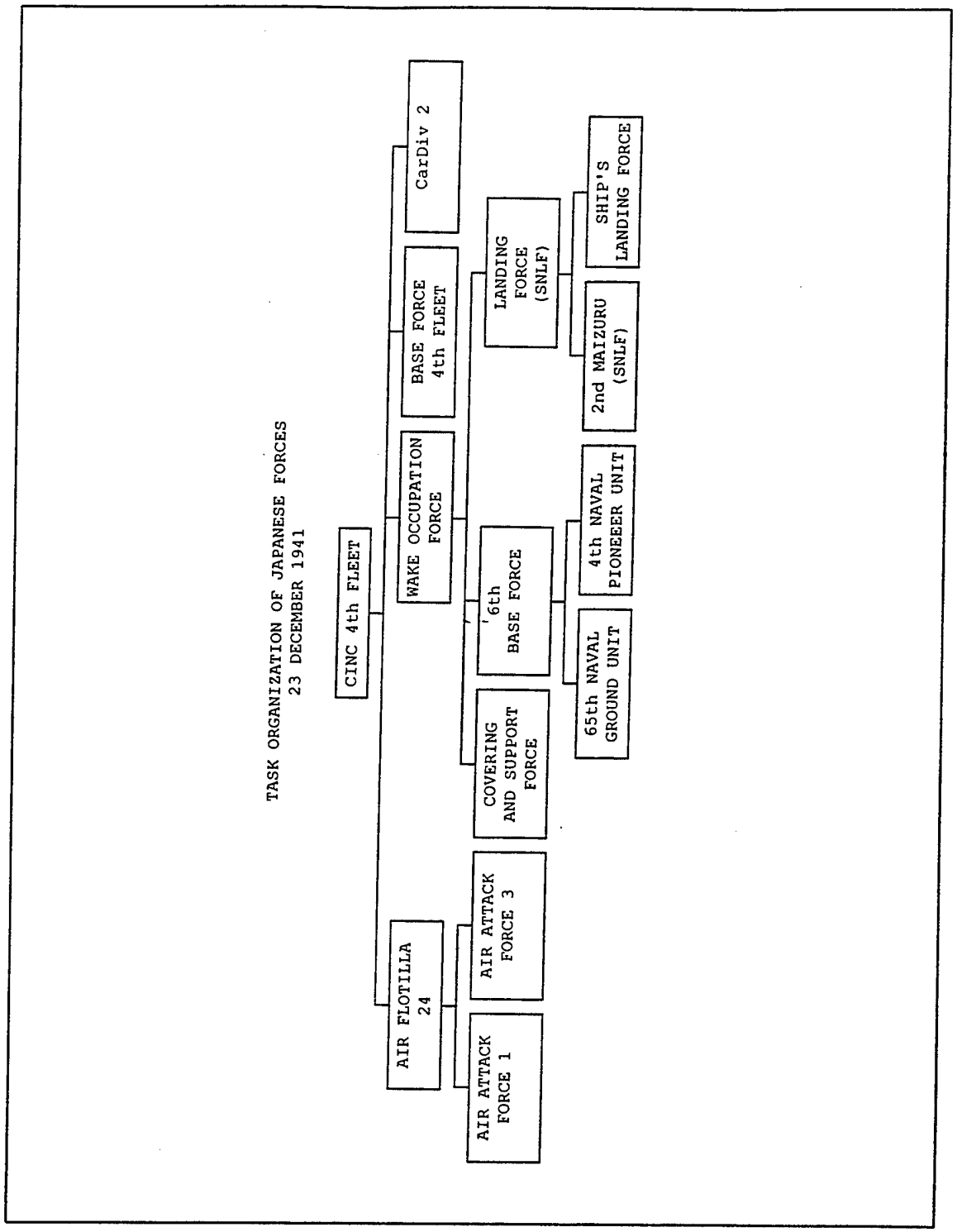

Figure 7. Japanese Task Organization 23 December

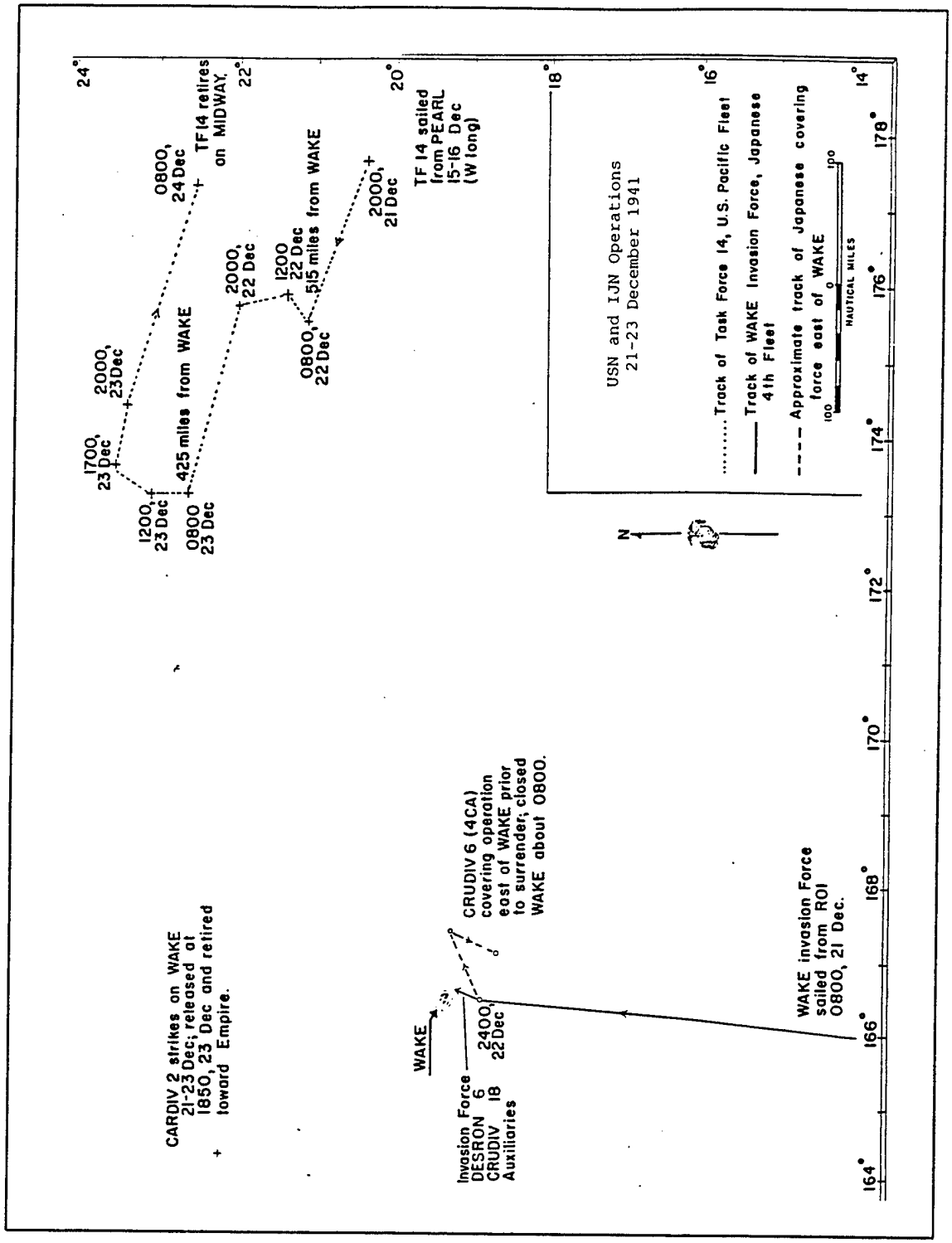

Figure 8. Usn and IJN Operations 21-23 December

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