

BUILDING FOR WAR

*The Epic Saga
of the Civilian Contractors
and Marines of Wake Island
in World War II*

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THE BATTLE FOR WAKE

The first evidence that the Imperial Japanese Navy had commenced the invasion of Wake Island appeared in the form of flashing lights at sea off the north coast in the early hours of December 23. The dark night, ever-present roar of the surf, and rising squalls impeded vision and hearing. Alerted and jittery in anticipation, lookouts across the atoll detected the approaching enemy in every moving shadow and splash. Gun crews moved to their battery positions and commanders ordered patrols to watch the beaches and channels. When the attack commenced, however, it came from the south to the lee shore of Wake, as always anticipated, where the reef came closest to shore. In hundreds of rough dugouts in the brush, sleepers stirred, soon awakening to the battle upon which their lives depended.

From the dark, heaving sea, four Japanese landing craft deliberately ran onto the reef, two south of Wilkes and two off Wake, discharging hundreds of troops of the Special Naval Landing Force (SNLF). A quick flash from a searchlight on Wilkes exposed the ships, and the Wilkes defenders opened up with machine gunfire and blasts from their three-inch guns. As the first wave of enemy troops slogged through the surf toward Wilkes they met a hail of bullets and hand grenades, but a hundred made it to shore and engaged the marines in hand-to-hand combat, pressing the defenders and their civilian volunteers back. The Japanese quickly captured Battery F and soon found and cut the telephone lines linking Wilkes with the command post on Wake. The Americans fell back and regrouped for counterattack.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, a few hundred feet off Wake, troops slid from the other two beached landing craft into the churning surf. Their primary mission was to seize the airstrip and then make gains along the southern arm of Wake. However, the easternmost patrol boat had landed in short range of a three-inch gun that had been taken from Battery E and positioned for antboat defense between the airstrip parking area and the south beach. Sprinting to the gun, 2nd Lt. Robert M. Hanna, another marine, and three civilians took their places, opening fire on the invaders from the three-inch gun. One shell hit a magazine on the patrol boat with the resulting explosions filling the sky with a pyrotechnic show, setting fire to the transport, and revealing the surf rapidly filling with SNLF troops. The illuminated battlefield enabled additional guns joined in the fray including a .50-caliber machine gun manned by three civilians. The burning ship also revealed the second transport run aground a few hundred yards west. Along the south beach of Wake American

guns tore into the two ships and targets in the water. Bodies floated and piled up on the beach, but the Imperial Japanese Navy had ensured its success with numbers and the invaders made their beachhead.

Devereux ordered Major Putnam and the VMF-211 personnel at the airstrip to Lieutenant Hanna's aid, as well as a nine-man gun crew to truck in from one of the three-inch guns at Battery D on Peale. At the other guns on Peale the defenders, including Bowsher's all-civilian gun crew, stood ready in case the battle came to them. At the airfield Putnam directed an officer and six men to remain to guard the runway and blow it up if the Japanese broke through or attempted to use it. The loyal crew of civilian volunteers that had attached to VMF-211 earlier in the siege rebuffed Putnam's concern for their safety and joined the dozen marines heading into the brush toward Hanna's gun. The unarmed civilians shouldered ammunition for the marine's machine guns and Browning automatic rifles. As the reinforcements approached Hanna picked off a Japanese force waiting in the brush to ambush the reinforcements. Under increasing fire Putnam's marines and civilians took position in the dark, spreading out to either side of Hanna's gun.

Japanese troops broke out of their beachhead and expanded onto the airfield where they found ditches and berms for cover. They severed telephone lines laying on the ground, cutting off communications between Devereux's command post and the battle stations on Peale, Wilkes, the west end of Wake, and the airfield. The invaders fanned out, some heading east to take on Peacock Point, others laying siege to Battery E, now on the inside elbow of Wake Island near the lagoon. Other SNLF troops turned back south to surround Hanna's gun. No further reinforcements would reach the beleaguered defenders.

Dawn brought a new component to the Battle of Wake: murky gray gradually gave way to a fully lit field. In the surf just east of Camp 1 two more landing craft approached, struggling to gain purchase on the reef. Four volunteers, including a civilian veteran of World War I, grabbed grenades and made their way onto the rocky beach, not once but twice. The second effort landed at least one grenade on a landing barge with devastating effect, but could not halt the landing. Guns engaged along the shoreline and shells from distant batteries fired on the transport ships. Across the channel on Wilkes the split-up defenders managed to regroup and surprise the enemy from two directions at Battery F, killing all but two Japanese whom they took prisoner.