

WORLD WAR II:
 70 YEARS AGO

DECEMBER

19

By Eric Hammel

They came out of the north in their disciplined formations: airplanes beautiful in flight, deadly in purpose and intent. The main body made directly for the mother lode of battleships tied up in the harbor, and the rest went after the American warplanes, which were lined up neatly on the airfields around the harbor.

Hardly a man looked up until the death and destruction had commenced. Marines at Pearl Harbor were as stunned as anyone, as unprepared, as slow to react to the surreal circumstance of war that suddenly rained on them, enveloped them, dusted them with death.

The first to die were those in the great battleships in the harbor. They died as they prepared to hoist their flags; they died in their bunks as they slept in that last Sunday moment of peace; they died at their guns as they dueled Emperor Hirohito's airplanes face-on. In a few cases they triumphed, pitching the odd torpedo plane or dive bomber or fighter into the land or water. In the end, those who were able, fought the raging fires and tended to the dead and wounded.

It was 7 Dec., and at Ewa Field, the men of Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 21 were caught utterly flat-footed by the first wave of 21 Zero carrier fighters sent to strafe their little, out-of-the-way base. The officer of the day had a bare moment to sound the alarm after he recognized Japanese torpedo planes headed for the fleet anchorage. But the Zeros arrived before anyone at Ewa could respond.

A mile short of the airfield, the base commander, Lieutenant Colonel Claude Larkin, scrambled out of his 1930 Ford and into a ditch as a strafing opened fire on the car. The Ford was shot up heavily, so Larkin hotfooted the last mile to Ewa. Once there, he took cover beneath a truck as unchallenged Zeros strafed the neatly parked MAG-21 aircraft and the base facilities.

Not a single Marine machine gun responded initially; not a single Marine aircraft could be launched into the sky. A Marine with a pistol took on one strafing Zero. He stood tall beside a wrecked air-

plane and dueled the pilot face to face.

The only opposition the Japanese faced over Ewa came from a pair of Army Air Corps P-40s that suddenly appeared and shot down three bomb-carrying Imperial Navy B5N torpedo bombers. It was the most successful aerial encounter of the day.

In the midst of a second Japanese attack, several U.S. Navy SBD scout bombers from USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) set down on the Ewa runways. The pilots were warned that the field was under intermittent attack, but only one left for another haven while the others certainly figured that any piece of ground they had reached was safer than any volume of air they might fly in.

As the attack progressed, the MAG-21 Marines at Ewa broke out a few machine guns and salvaged others from wrecked planes. The spooked Marines, who shot at anything in the air, claimed one dive bomber shot down.

The attacks ended by 1000. Marines at Ewa counted three of their number killed, 33 of 47 aircraft destroyed, and two aircraft barely salvageable.

Marines guarding the Ford Island Naval Air Station brought rifles and machine guns into action following a brief period of notable confusion. A quick-thinking

bugler called out 1st and 3d Defense battalions' troops at the Marine Barracks in the Navy Yard. Eight anti-aircraft machine guns were manned and firing within six minutes of the start of the attack, and more were quickly broken out of the armory. Hundreds of Marines not occupied in belting ammunition were given rifles and ammunition, then left to their own instincts to fire at the swooping Japanese warplanes. Before long, 3-inch anti-aircraft guns were broken out of storage, and 2d Engineer Bn trucks were dispatched to the ammunition storage facility, which was 27 miles from

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NATIONAL ARCHIVES & RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Insert: This frame from a Japanese propaganda film reportedly shows Mitsubishi A6M Zeros as they get ready to attack Hawaii.

Crossover photo: USS *California* (BB-44) lists to port after being hit by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor on 7 Dec. The Navy oiler USS *Neosho* (AO-23) is cautiously backing to stern as she escapes major damage. (Library of Congress photo)



Pearl Harbor. The 3-inch guns never fired that day.

By 0820, Marines at the barracks had set up 20 machine guns and accounted for one Japanese plane, and while the attack was still underway, 25 more machine guns opened fire. Altogether, the Defense Bn Marines claimed three kills and one kill shared with ships' gunners. Nine Marines were wounded there, but many sailors and Marines from the ships in the harbor were treated at dressing stations set up at the barracks. Indeed, 102 seagoing Marines were killed that morning, and 55 were



USMC

This Marine was wounded at Ewa Field on Oahu.

The Ewa Field hangar and most of the base facilities were destroyed on the morning of 7 Dec. (USMC photo)



wounded in action; six of whom later died.

In China on the first day of war (8 Dec. local time), only a few Marines remained. The Fourth Marine Regiment, based in Shanghai for decades, had pulled out to the Philippines on the eve of war. That left embassy guard detachments at Peiping and Tientsin and a work detail preparing for an evacuation of the embassy guards from Chinwangtao. All three detachments received news of the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and the Philippines, and all three prepared to resist local Japanese forces. Nevertheless, the cooler heads of senior officers prevailed, and all the Marines in northern China had surrendered to Japanese forces by the end of the first day of the war.

The small Navy-Marine garrison at Guam knew that the worst was coming: American dependents had been evacuated in October, and on 6 Dec. the garrison had been ordered to destroy all its classified documents. Then, on 8 Dec. (it was 7 Dec. in Hawaii) word came of the Pearl Harbor attack. Three hours later, Saipan-based Imperial Navy bombers attacked a minesweeper in Apra Harbor. The ship was sunk, survivors from her crew joined the

garrison, and the island's capital at Agana was evacuated by civilians.

The island was bombed on 9 Dec. (local), and a Japanese naval landing force from Saipan numbering about 6,000 troops began to come ashore at 0400. There were several clashes. Marines at Sumay Barracks held off the attackers, but the situation was utterly hopeless. The island commander surrendered at 0600. Four of the 19 American fatalities were Marines, as were 12 of the 42 wounded. All the survivors were shipped to Japan on 10 Jan.

The only American warplanes based at Midway northwest of Hawaii on 7 Dec. 1941 were seven U.S. Navy PBY Catalina patrol bombers. At 0630 (0900 at Pearl Harbor), the island command was informed of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Five of the PBYs were out on search missions; two Royal Netherlands Navy patrol bombers just had taken off for Wake Island on their way to the Netherlands East Indies; and the two remaining U.S. Navy PBYs were warming up for a mission to guide Marine Scout-Bombing Squadron (VMSB) 231 SB2U Vindicator scout bombers that were scheduled to be launched from USS *Lexington* (CV-2) that morning.

Immediately, the Dutch PBYs were recalled to Midway and folded into the Navy patrol effort, the 6th Marine Defense Bn was placed on full alert, and *Lexington* was diverted to search for the Japanese carrier task force.

Beginning at 1842, Marine lookouts spotted activity seaward, and at 2130 the island's crude surface-search radar picked up a target. The commander of the Marine searchlight battery wanted to illuminate the radar target, but senior officers quashed the request. At 2135, a pair of Japanese destroyers dispatched direct from Tokyo opened fire. The ships had no other objective beyond neutralizing Midway's air base, so aircraft there could not interdict the carrier fleet as it retired from the Pearl Harbor attack.

The initial salvo fell short, but the second struck several 5-inch coastal gun emplacements, and subsequent salvos bracketed the power plant and hit the concrete command post of a .50-caliber machine-gun platoon. In the power plant, First Lieutenant George Cannon was wounded severely, but he oversaw the splicing of severed communications lines and refused treatment until an enlisted



Inset: A VMF-211 Wildcat pilot sinking Japanese destroyer *Kisaragi* while it was attacking Wake Island on 11 Dec. made the cover of a WW II Marine binder.

Marine had received care. The delay cost Cannon his life. He was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honor, the first Marine to be so honored in the war.

A real duel commenced at 2153, when Marine searchlights found one of the destroyers, and a 3-inch dual-purpose gun battery opened fire. A battle royal ensued for five minutes before the destroyers retired. Many shore installations were damaged, four men were killed (including two from the 6th Defense Bn), and 19 were wounded (including 10 Marines). Gunners felt they had hit one of the destroyers, but there is no supporting evidence.



NATIONAL ARCHIVES & RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Inset: Wake's future was sealed when Aichi D3A carrier attack bombers from *Hiryu* and *Soryu* struck the island on 21 Dec. 1941.

VMSB-231 was returned to Pearl Harbor on board *Lexington*, but within a week of that sole attack on Midway, which failed to neutralize the island's air contingent, 17 of the squadron's SB2U Vindicators guided by a Navy PBY undertook a groundbreaking, record-setting overwater flight back to Midway. Later in the month, Brewster F2A Buffalo fighters from Marine Fighting Squadron (VMF) 221 were flown off USS *Saratoga* (CV-3) to Midway, and a large contingent of the 4th Defense Bn also was dispatched.

Tiny Johnston Atoll was not molested until the night of 12 Dec., when an Imperial Navy submarine fired a star-shell cluster over the base. A Marine 5-inch coast-defense gun—one of just two emplaced in the atoll—fired one star shell of its own, and the submarine made off. This or another submarine, or perhaps several, shelled the island on 15 Dec., causing a fire and considerable damage. Marines returned fire, and the bombardment from the sea ended abruptly. A brief, inconclusive duel erupted on the night of 21 Dec. and again the next night. Thereafter, the tiny atoll was reinforced with more heavy guns, machine guns and a provisional infantry company, but it was never attacked again.

Palmyra, which lay 900 miles southeast of Johnston, was shelled at dawn on 24 Dec. 1941, but return fire from the 5-inch battery caused the Japanese submarine to depart. The atoll was reinforced by the end of the month, but it was never attacked again.

Although isolated, Johnston and Palmyra became important links in the air route from Hawaii to the South Pacific and Australia. They were garrisoned by Marines throughout the war.

The Japanese onslaught against Wake

Island, directly north of the Marshall Islands and the westernmost North Pacific outpost held by American troops, started at 1158 on 8 Dec. (local time). The attack was delivered by 36 Imperial Navy Mitsubishi G3M land-based attack bombers out of the Roi Island airdrome in the Marshall Islands' Kwajalein Atoll. At the moment of attack, only four VMF-211 F4F Wildcats were aloft, but they were searching in the wrong direction. The unopposed Japanese bombers destroyed all of the seven remaining Wildcats with their bombs, which also killed three Marine pilots and wounded four. Among the equipment and goods destroyed around the airfield were a large supply of aviation gasoline, the only air-ground radio on hand and high-altitude oxygen tanks.

The Roi-based G3Ms returned at 1145 on 9 Dec. That time they were opposed by the remaining F4Fs, as well as accurate anti-aircraft fire put up by the 422-man 1st Defense Bn contingent based at Wake. One G3M was downed by anti-aircraft fire, and a second fell to a cooperative effort between F4F pilots Second Lieutenant David Kliewer and Technical Sergeant William J. Hamilton. It was the first air-to-air victory awarded to Marines in World War II.

In California on 9 Dec. (10 Dec. at Wake), USS *Saratoga* and her accompanying task force departed San Diego for a direct run to Wake. Embarked in the carrier were 18 VMF-221 F2A Buffalo fighters.

At Wake on 10 Dec., 26 G3Ms attacked at 1045. Two of the G3Ms were downed by a VMF-211 pilot, but that attack wave, like all others, was responsible for destroying or damaging irreplaceable facilities and equipment.

Beginning at 0300 on 11 Dec., a 450-man naval landing force attached to the Imperial Navy's Truk-based Fourth Fleet began to move toward Wake's beaches aboard a pair of destroyer transports. Sharp-eyed Marines spotted the silhouettes of the transports and accompanying warships, and all guns that could bear were ordered to train on targets but remain silent until ordered to fire. The landing was long delayed as the Imperial Navy ground troops struggled on board landing craft in adverse surf conditions. Finally, at 0500, the flagship, light cruiser *Yubari*, opened fire at shore targets; then all the warships opened fire. Despite solid hits and damage



OFFICIAL USMC DOCUMENT

The Imperial Navy Kawanishi H6K long-range reconnaissance bomber was used throughout the war for patrolling the vast Pacific region. (National Archives & Records Administration photo)



to shore facilities, the Marine commander, Major James P. S. Devereaux, continued to hold fire.

Finally, a little after daybreak—0615—Devereaux ordered his Btry A 5-inch guns to commence firing. Targets were 3,500 yards distant. The Btry A guns and those of Btry L soon were brought on target, and Btry L struck *Yubari* twice. In the ensuing duel, nearly an hour in length, the Marine coastal gunners hit several other warships, possibly sank destroyer *Hayate* and drove off the entire invasion flotilla.

Following up on the clear victory, the three remaining VMF-211 Wildcats repeatedly attacked the departing flotilla with guns and bombs. Two light cruisers, a destroyer and a transport were damaged. During a second mission undertaken by fresh pilots, a destroyer transport was damaged, and the destroyer damaged in the first attack, *Kisaragi*, blew up and sank as a Wildcat was diving on her, possibly the first warship ever sunk by a fighter. In return, one fighter had its engine destroyed by return fire.

Also on 11 Dec., pilots manning the two remaining F4Fs scrambled at 1000 to

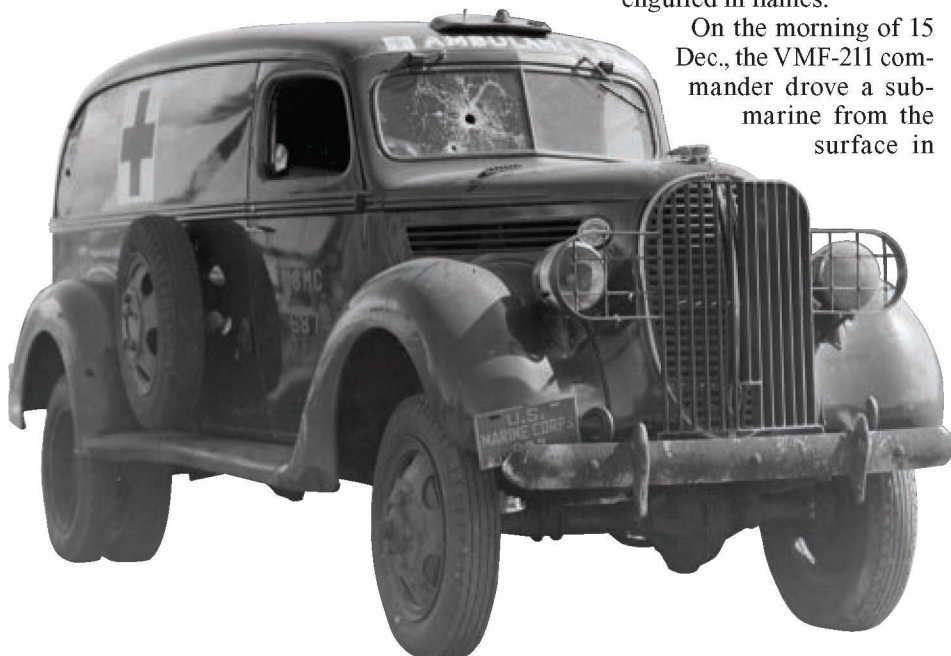
intercept an incoming strike. Two G3Ms were downed, and a third was set afire.

On 12 Dec., a pair of Kawanishi H6K amphibian reconnaissance bombers from Majuro Atoll appeared over Wake at 0500. The two remaining F4Fs were scrambled, and one H6K was shot down. That evening, an F4F damaged a surfaced submarine.

Wake was attacked at 0600 on 14 Dec. by three H6Ks based at

Wotje Atoll. The bombs landed near the airstrip without effect. Then, at 1100, 30 Roi-based G3Ms bombed the airstrip and a nearby Marine encampment. Two VMF-211 groundcrewmembers were killed, and one Marine was wounded. A bomb demolished one of the two serviceable F4Fs. Miraculously, two Marine pilots and a Navy groundcrewman salvaged the engine from the wreck even as the fighter was engulfed in flames.

On the morning of 15 Dec., the VMF-211 commander drove a submarine from the surface in



This bullet-spattered U.S. ambulance at Pearl Harbor served notice that the Empire of Japan would not honor the Geneva Conventions. (USMC photo)



was shot down by a 3-inch gun, but this small victory was wiped out when one of the F4Fs fell out of the sky during a take-off. Capping the day was a pinprick raid at 1750 by H6Ks that bombed and strafed the defenses, albeit with little effect.

The only air activity over Wake on 18 Dec. was assumed to be a photo-reconnaissance flight by a single airplane that remained at 20,000 feet and well out of range of Wake's formidable anti-aircraft defenses.

At 1050 on 19 Dec., 27 G3Ms bombed the VMF-211 area and other previously bombed targets. Accurate anti-aircraft fire was thought to hit four of the Roi-based bombers, and one of those was seen to crash shortly after its crew bailed out over the sea.

There was constrained jubilation on 20 Dec. because bad weather over the island obviated bombing attacks. There was yet more jubilation at 1530 when a U.S. Navy PBV landed in the lagoon to deliver news that the *Saratoga* task force was drawing closer in the hope of delivering VMF-221, as well as defending the air over Wake. The task force also wanted to land troops

one Marine noncommissioned officer was killed and three Marines were wounded. In return for achieving a staggering blow against the accuracy of Wake's anti-aircraft batteries, the Japanese lost one bomber shot down.

VMF-211 had two operational Wildcats aloft when the carrier planes returned on 22 Dec. The pilots launched independent attacks. One shot down two Zero fighters in separate passes, but the other was shot down by a Zero as he attacked a formation of D3As. The first pilot was then wounded by a Zero, and he barely survived the crash landing of that last VMF-211 Wildcat. Wake thus had no fighter protection. Unopposed, the D3As attacked battery positions with almost no effect. After the attack, with no hope of getting any F4Fs back into the air, VMF-211 turned to for duty as infantry.

Out to sea, just 625 miles from Wake, the *Saratoga* task force, embarking VMF-221, pulled up to conduct needed refueling operations. The carrier was too far from Wake to launch the Marine F2A Buffalo fighters, but it was thought the fighters could be brought within range on 23 Dec.

Nevertheless, during the night, *Saratoga* was ordered back to Hawaii. Also ordered back to Hawaii was a task force built around carrier USS *Lexington*. All hope for relieving Wake had been extinguished.

At 0200 on 23 Dec., a total of 1,500 Imperial Navy infantrymen began the final assault on Wake. The cruel 11-hour battle that ensued cost Japan an estimated 200 troops killed as the Marines, sailors and even a few civilian construction workers fought brutally in a vain effort to overcome the sheer weight of the assault. But it was for nothing. Nearly 80 Americans fell, and in the end

Maj Devereaux and the island commander knew they must surrender.

As details of Wake's heroic defense were brought out to the American public, many thousands of young American men and women flocked to Marine Corps recruiting stations to honor and avenge the sacrifice.

Editor's note: Eric Hammel is the author of more than 40 military history books, most about U.S. Marines in combat. This article is based on excerpts from his book "Pacific Warrior." Visit his website at www.erichammelbooks.com.



USMC ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Inset: Wake Island was lost, but a look at the VMF-211 honeypot showed the Japanese Imperial Navy that American ingenuity—like that used to swap parts and pieces, keeping fighters in the air—was a portent of things to come.

what amounted to a simple look at it because the pilot thought it might be a Dutch boat. There was no air attack on Wake that day or the next, but time was running out for Wake's gallant little garrison.

Even though each day that passed brought possible relief or reinforcement closer, it also gave the hamstrung Japanese in the Marshall Islands more time to array reinforcements of their own. Wake was a target of such strategic significance that the Japanese simply could not leave it in American hands.

Wake's defenders pieced together four serviceable F4Fs by dawn on 17 Dec. At 1317, 27 G3Ms from Roi hit the diesel-fuel main storage, wiped out the defense battalion mess hall and damaged the salt-water evaporators upon which the garrison depended for drinking water. One G3M

from the 4th Defense Bn to help man the 1st Defense Bn guns because there were actually too many to be fired at once by Maj Devereaux's demibattalion.

With a Marine aviation staff officer and a load of reports on board, the PBV departed at 0700 on 21 Dec. At 0850, 29 Aichi D3A attack bombers, accompanied by 18 Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighters from fleet carriers *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, struck Wake a wicked low-level blow that caused little material but immense moral damage. Then, within three hours, 33 G3Ms struck one of the anti-aircraft batteries dead center on the gun-director position, where

Leatherneck—On the Web

See more photos from the 7 Dec. 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and actions around the Pacific at the beginning of the war at www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/pearl-harbor-dec7