

# Revisiting Wake

An expeditionary advanced base Decision Forcing Case

by LtCol Roy M. Draa

The Navy and Marine Corps have published *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* and *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment* as the future of naval doctrine for great power competition in the 21st century. The *38th Commandant's Planning Guidance* states:

The Marine Corps will be trained and equipped as a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness and prepared to operate inside actively contested maritime spaces in support of fleet operations. In crisis prevention and crisis response, the Fleet Marine Force—acting as an extension of the Fleet—will be first on the scene, first to help, first to contain a brewing crisis, and first to fight if required to do so.

This imperative was subsequently reinforced with the publication of *Force Design 2030*.

The Decision Forcing Case is a valuable tool in our arsenal to help us tease out questions and discuss solutions to our modern problem of “operating inside actively contested maritime spaces” through the use of an historical examination of a similar problem set. We have sailed these seas before. In 1933, the Marine Corps created the Fleet Marine Force, published new doctrine in *A Tentative Manual for Landing Operations* in 1934, and established the Marine Defense Battalions in 1939 in response to the 1938 Hepburn Board’s report on fortifications in the Pacific.

***“The Strategic importance of Wake is increasingly evident, as one enquires into the means by which the Pacific Fleet may carry on offensive operations to the westward ... [a]s an operating patrol plane base, it could prove valuable to us in observing the Marshalls, or in covering advance of our forces toward the Saipan-Honshu line. In the hands of the Japanese, it would be a serious obstacle to surprise raids in the Northern Marshalls, or on Marcus, Port Lloyd, or Saipan, and would be capable of causing serious interference with other secret movements of our forces ... [i]f Wake be defended, then for the Japanese to reduce it would require extended operations of their naval force in an area where we might be able to get at them; thus affording us an opportunity to get at naval forces with naval forces. We should try, by every possible means, to get the Japanese to expose naval units. It is therefore recommended that units of a marine defense battalion be progressively established on Wake as facilities there permit.”***

**—Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, USN  
Commander Pacific Fleet, 18 April 1941**

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For the purposes of this problem, you are Commander Winfield S. “SPIV” Cunningham, USN, Naval Aviator, and up until mid-November of 1941, the Navigation Officer of the seaplane tender USS *Wright* (AV-1). You are about to assume command of the Naval Air Station on Wake Island (19° 16’N., 166° 37’E.), currently under construction, reporting to Commander, 14th Naval District in Pearl Harbor as your higher headquarters. You have read the Hepburn Board report, are well aware of War Plan Orange, and understand that Wake Island is intended to be an early warning outpost for the Pacific Fleet. You have a good idea of what is currently on Wake and have read the construction reports back at Pearl: ordnance magazines, fuel tanks, docks, a few buildings and utilities, incomplete barracks, and hospital. No hardened hangars. The real question is time. There is no way of knowing how much time you have. *How will you prioritize your efforts? What is your focus: construction of the*



**Destroyed Grumman F4F-3 Wildcat fighters of Marine Fighter Squadron 211 (VMF-211), on the Wake Island Airfield Tail number 211-F-11 was flown by Capt Henry T. Elrod during the 11 December attack that sank the Japanese destroyer *Kisaragi*. (Official U.S. Navy Photograph, now in the collections of the National Archives. U.S. Navy History and Heritage Command.)**



**Wake Island. U.S. Navy History and Heritage Command.** (Official U.S. Navy Photograph, now in the collections of the National Archives. U.S. Navy History and Heritage Command.)

*airfield or hardening the defenses, reinforcing the garrison or building up fuel and ordnance stockpiles?*

**Situation:** It is 28 November 1941. You are on board the *Wright* approaching Wake to take command of the Naval Air Station on the island. Over 1,000 miles to the east lie the Hawaiian Islands, 700 hundred miles to the west lies Marcus Island, and over 600 miles to the south is Kwajalein. From the starboard bridge wing, you can see all three of the low-lying islands surrounded by reefs and heavy surf. It is not the bare sandy spit you had expected. There are large forested areas and dense undergrowth. The beach drops from 4 to 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> feet at the high watermark and varies in depth from 20 to 170 yards out. There only appear to be two channels through the coral reefs into the lagoon. The airfield (5,000 x 200 feet) appears to be relatively complete and there are a handful of blue and grey U.S. Navy monoplanes lined up along the tarmac. All the islands have small structures, houses, and the beginnings of a barracks and hospital on Peale Island to the west. You climb down the cargo net over the side into a pitching motor launch on the rise of the swell with the rest of your staff. As the launch motors through the breakers and the lagoon to the Navy seaplane dock on Wilkes Island, you see Pan-American Airlines' Martin 130 Flying boat, the *Philippine Clipper*, moored nearby and several small lighters docked to the east. A few hundred yards behind in the channel, three other boats are filled to the gunwhales with Marines from the *Wright*. Maj Walter L.J. Bayler is one of them, the senior MAG-21 representative to the island garrison. He will return to Pearl once the airfield is operational. Lt Robert J. Conderman, OIC of the detachment from MAG-21, will run airfield operations with his 49 Marines. A Marine fighter squadron, VMF-211 is due to fly in from the *Enterprise* in a few days. Waiting on the dock is a small knot of Marines and Naval officers, as well as some civilians.

You meet with this reception committee as you walk to a waiting staff car, and they provide you with their unit personnel and equipment status reports as follows:

Maj Devereux: "Sir, Maj J.P. Devereux, commanding a detachment of the 1st Marine Defense Battalion, the rest of my battalion is spread out between Pearl Harbor, Midway, and Johnston Atoll. We landed here on 19 August. I have, including myself, 15 Marine officers and 373 enlisted Marines

in Batteries Able, Easy, Dog, George, and Love. Dog Battery is the only unit with fully operational fire control equipment, so we will have to relay targeting data by field telephone. George is a searchlight battery, but we lack our sound detection equipment and have no radar equipment. We have a small medical detachment headed by LTJG Gus Kahn. I have eight deuce and half trucks, but only seven are operational if we need to tow guns or move ammunition. We haven't had the chance to dig in the guns; we only have hand tools and a lot of our time is spent hand pumping aviation fuel for the airfield. My boys are all artillery and support types, but we're trained as provisional infantry with a mix of Springfields, Colts, hand grenades, and a few BARs. I only have one and a half units of fire for the three- and five-inch guns, good for about ten days of sustained combat with disciplined fire. VMF-211 is expected to arrive in a few days. We have 90 days of rations. Here is the status of my weapons:

Crew Served Weapons:

- -30x .30 Cal, water cooled M1919 Browning Medium Machine Gun : Range 1,400m-18x .50 Cal, air cooled M2 Browning Heavy Machine Gun (HMG): Range: 1830m.
- -12x 3in. Anti-aircraft Automatic Cannon: Range: 6,400m, 1x of 12 Auxiliary Predictors operable (mechanically computes trigonometric targeting solutions), 8x of 12 Altitude Finders operable.

Coastal Artillery:

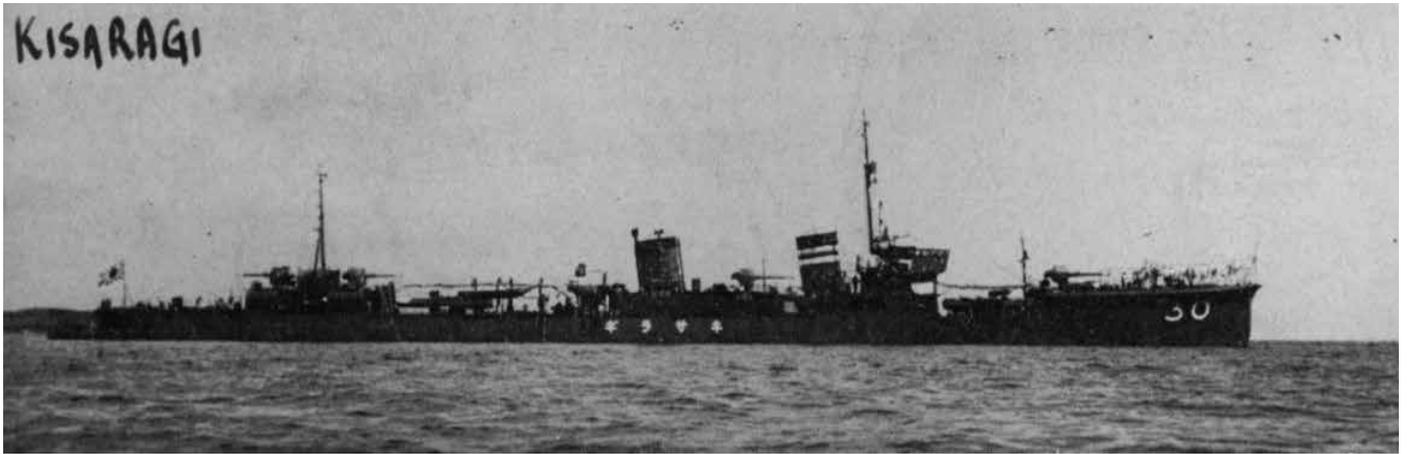
- -6x 5-inch/155mm: 6 guns Range 15.6km.
- -2x Sperry 60 inch Searchlight: Range 18.2 km."

Cdr Keene: "Commander (Cdr) Keene, Patrol Wing 2. I have 4 officers and 30 sailors with 2 Brewster Buffaloes and 1 Catalina PBY (Seaplane). The Buffaloes are little slower than the Marines' Wildcat, but they handle better in a turn and carry the same armament, to include 2x 100 pound bombs. We'll be here until VMF-211 gets in. The airfield support group has 5 officers and 30 sailors. They have one surgeon, and two pharmacist's mates. We also have two small boats from the tender.

PBY-3 Catalina: 3x .30 Cal Browning Medium Machine Gun (2x nose, 1x tail: 1,200 rounds each), 2x .50 Cal M2 Browning HMG (2x waist: 1,200 rounds each) 2x 500 pound bombs, 4x depth charges, Range: 2,520 miles, Service Ceiling: 15,800 ft., Speed at sea level: 125 mph (Cruise), Max: 195 mph."

Mr. Peters: "Sir, N.D. Peters. I'm the general superintendent for the Morris-Knudson construction crew here on Wake with 1,200 construction workers. Fought in the Great War myself, and some of my men did as well. We have three operational bulldozers, four half-ton trucks, a grader, two steam shovels, and a steamroller. I have enough food on hand for six months and a hospital on the north end of Wake. We still have several projects with a way to go. There are also 70 Pan-Am employees and Chamorros (Melanesian workers) on Wilkes that work for Pan-Am Airlines."

*What are your orders, what do you report back to your higher headquarters, Commander, 14th Naval District?*



**Imperial Japanese Destroyer Kisagari, U.S. Navy History and Heritage Command.** (Official U.S. Navy Photograph, now in the collections of the National Archives. U.S. Navy History and Heritage Command.)

On the morning of 4 December, your tiny garrison is reinforced by the anticipated arrival of VMF-211, Maj P.F. Putnam, Commanding. Maj Putnam has 11 officers and 47 Marines. One of the F4F Wildcats pancaked on landing, crushing its landing gear and leaving 11/12 ready basic aircraft (RBA). They lack reserve external tanks, and their electric bomb releases do not mate with the 57 100-pound bombs you have in the airfield's magazines. Later that day, another Wildcat is flown off the USS *Enterprise* to bring the complement back up to 12/13 RBA. At least you have a hangar queen for spare parts. As expected, the Navy Patrol Wing 2 detachment departed Wake once VMF-211 arrived.

Equipment: 12/13 Grumman F4F Wildcats, 4x .50 Cal M2 Browning HMG (450 Rounds each), 2x 100 pound bombs, Range: 860 miles, Service Ceiling: 37,000 feet. Speed at sea level: 281 mph.

*What are your orders, what do you report back to your higher headquarters, Commander, 14th Naval District?*

On 8 December, Maj Devereux arrives at your bunker with a message from the Army Air Corps signal station that Pearl Harbor is under attack. At 1155, you received a report from the Marine Defense Battalion Fire Control Center of 36 Japanese bombers approaching from the west. At 1200, they dropped their payloads on the airfield, destroying seven wildcats, a fuel storage tank, and killing 23 Marine and Navy

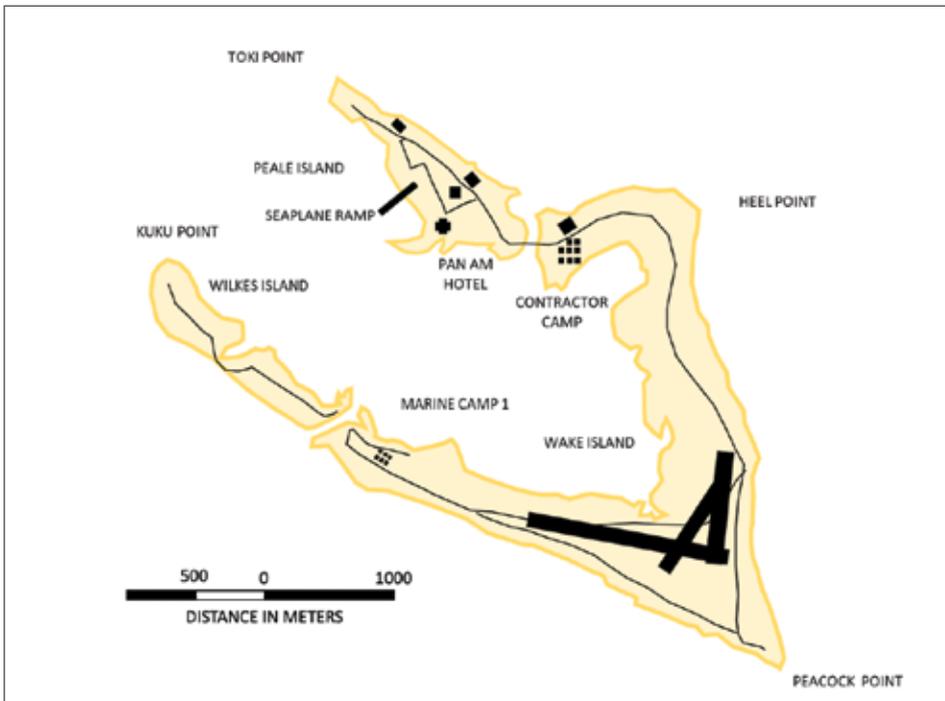
aviation ground support personnel. The attacks occurred again at the same time between 8-10 December. On the 8th, a bomb hit a storage shed on Wilkes Island where some dynamite was stored for construction. All the guns and ammunition positioned there were destroyed and the crews were severely injured. On the 9th, a Pan-Am Martin 130 flying boat landed to pick up its American employees, leaving the Chamorros to fend for themselves, and the hospital and radio buildings on the air station were destroyed.

*It is now 1215 on the 10th, what are your orders? What do you report to 14th Naval District?*

11 December 1941

No 2

The Marine garrison on Wake Island has been subject to four separate attacks in the last 48 hours by enemy aircraft and 1 by light naval units. Despite the loss of part of the defend-



**Wake Island.** This diagram can be used to draw your defensive positions, fire support control measures and obstacles as well as vertical/horizontal construction. (Map by author.)

ing planes and the damage to material and personnel, the defending garrison succeeded in sinking one light cruiser and one destroyer of the enemy forces by air action. A resumption of the attack and a probable landing attempt is expected. The Marine garrison is continuing to resist. The above report is based on information received up until noon 11 December.

At 0300 on December 11th, you received reports of ship silhouettes offshore. By 0530 the eastern sky is beginning to lighten, and the cruiser *Yubari* and destroyers *Kisagari* and *Havate* as well as two transports are identified. Minutes later, about 5,000 yards offshore, three Japanese ships open fire on Wake. The cruiser is struck in its forecandle and is listing to port. A destroyer turns away, but two more cruisers steam about 8,000 yards to the west of Wilkes Island. As one makes a run at the island, it is hit head on with a two-gun salvo and appears to break in two. Another cruiser puts about and is trailing smoke. At a range of 10,000 yards, another destroyer squadron begins pummeling Peale Island. By 0700, the bombardment ceases and the ships are all steaming west, some still trailing smoke, but another bombing run by three divisions of attack aircraft are intercepted by VMF-211. The naval construction authorities at Pearl also want a status report on the dredging in the lagoon, it was due yesterday.

*What are your orders? What do you report to 14th Naval District?*

14 December 1941

No 7

There have been two additional bombing attacks on Wake Island. The first was light, the second was undertaken in great force. Two enemy bombers were shot down. Damage was inconsequential. The Marines on Wake Island continue to resist. Enemy submarines are known to be operating in the Hawaiian area. Vigorous attacks are being made against them. The above is based on reports up until noon today.

19 December 1941

No 12

The Navy Department issued the following communiqué, on the naval situation as of 9am today:

*Central Pacific.* There have been two additional air attacks by the enemy on Wake Island. The first occurred on the night of the 17th-18th and was comparatively light. The second was in greater force and occurred in the forenoon of the 19th. Wake Island continues to counter these blows.

On 20 December a Navy PBV was able to establish the first radio communications with the island since the 14th. Task Force-14 is enroute with another defense battalion and a fighter squadron. That was two days ago, and they should have been here already. On the 21st, the PBV took off with Maj Bayler hand-carrying your reports along with those of Maj Devereux and Maj Putnam. Shortly after, the atoll is hit again, leaving only two guns on Wilkes Island. Only one AA battery of 4x 3 in guns remains operable. Battery D is the only battery with four working height-finder devices. It is now 0200 on 22 December. There has not been a landing attempt since the 11th, but the bombing raids have been like

clockwork. The Marines' guns knocked out the *Yugari* and the Wildcats sank the *Kisagari*, but after ten days of fighting only two planes are RBA. Mitsubishi Zeros have been escorting short-range bombers, so there must be carriers right over the horizon. It is only a matter of time before another landing is attempted. You have not been able to talk to Pearl for more than a week and Task Force-14 should have been here already—or at least, the promised fighter squadron. Have they been destroyed or just simply turned around?

*What are your orders? What do you report to 14th Naval District? Can they even hear you?*



**Ralph Lee, Wake Island Cartoon, as reproduced in R.J. Cressman, *A Magnificent Fight: Marines in the Battle for Wake Island*, (Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, DC, 1992.) (Department of Defense photo (USMC) 307267.)**

In the early darkness of 23 December, a second Japanese amphibious assault force materialized on the southern horizon. By 0215 it was evident that another landing was being attempted; at 0235, Marines on Wake reported hearing large engines over the surf to the south. The first special landing force naval infantry came ashore near the south end of the airfield at 0245, but your naval guns could not traverse to engage the transports. At 0300 all communications lines between the batteries are cut. As the Japanese stormed the beach, the Marines engaged with the 3-inch guns, machine guns, and small arms, but were eventually forced back to the airfield. Your only remaining mobile reserve is a truck with eight Marines and three .30 caliber machine guns. One of your 3-inch guns lays directly on a beached destroyer escort then shifts to another on Wake's southern beach. The explosions light up the sky and you can see Japanese infantry swarming over the sides onto the surf and up the beach. By 0500 the sun is rising and the assault was supported by fighters and

bombers from the carriers *Soryu* and *Hiryu*. There are no ground assaults yet on Peale or Wilkes Islands; on Wake, the defense battalion Marines could not man their AA and naval guns while they were dealing with a ground assault. The battery at Peacock Point is taking machine gun and mortar fire.

*What are your orders?*

At 0700, a battered and tired Maj Devereux enters your command post:

Commander Cunningham, Sir. My men can't hold out much longer, we're down to four rounds of rifle ammunition per man, I've lost all my guns and only have three working machineguns. Sir, the Task Force is either at the bottom of the Pacific or CINCPAC has written us off, we should have seen their squadrons by now. We can't hold the island any longer. I recommend we surrender before throwing away any more lives.

*What are your orders?*

Taskforce-14, of course, never made it to Wake Island. The island was written off on 21/22 December by acting Pacific Fleet Commander, RADM Pye, who felt, in the absence of ADM Nimitz, he could not risk the ships to keep the island. The Marine Defense Battalions lacked mobility, were ill-equipped, and undermanned. They were not adequately supplied with sufficient ammunition and had outdated and refurbished weapons systems. Radar and surface combatant support were not available to augment and direct ground-based fighter patrols toward an approaching raid or landing force. Nevertheless, CDR Cunningham and the Wake defenders were able to repel one amphibious assault and tie up two enemy carrier air groups and destroyer squadrons for almost two weeks. They accounted for over 30 downed enemy aircraft and sank 2 destroyers, destroyed 2 landing craft, and significantly damaged an additional 8 enemy ships. When we consider emergent Navy-Marine Corps doctrines such as *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations* and *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment*, as well as the 38<sup>th</sup> CMC's Planning Guidance and Force Design 2030, *what are important lessons learned from the defense of Wake Island?*

- *What does Wake have to say about the future mission of a Marine littoral regiment with respect to sea control/denial?*

- *What capabilities might be required for a Marine littoral regiment to support the maneuver of naval littoral task force/group?*
- *How would this naval expeditionary force integrate with a higher or adjacent naval force?*
- *What naval force would you use to defend Wake today?*
- *What emergent technologies or capabilities could be leveraged for Wake to act as an EAB with a mission to support sea denial and allow a modern-day TASKFORCE-14 to close with an adversary naval force?*

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#### Notes

1. Samuel Cox, "Vice Admiral Pye's Decision," *Naval History and Heritage Command*, (December 2016), available at <https://www.history.navy.mil>.
2. Robert Cressman, *A Magnificent Fight: Marines in the Battle for Wake Island*, (Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Center, 1992).
3. W.S. Cunningham, "Narrative of CAPT W.S. Cunningham, U.S. Navy, Relative to the Events on Wake Island, December 1941 and Subsequent Related Events," *Naval History and Heritage Command*, available at <https://www.history.navy.mil>.
4. R.D. Heinl, *The Defense of Wake*, (Washington, DC: Historical Section, Division of Public Information, 1947).
5. Charles Melson, *Condition Red, Marine Defense Battalions in WWII*, (Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Center, Washington, 1996).
6. *Navy Department Communiqués 1-300 and Pertinent Press Releases December 10, 1941 to March 5, 1943*, (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1943).
7. David Ulbrich, *Thomas Holcomb and the Advent of the Marine Corps Defense Battalion, 1936-1941*, (Quantico, VA: Occasional Paper, History and Museums Division, Marine Corps University, 2004).
8. Charles Updegraph, *U.S. Marine Corps Special Units of WWII*, (Washington, DC: Marine Corps Historical Division, 1972).

