

Sergeant Robert Leroy Frey, USMC

WW II Wake Island Defender and POW Survivor



COURTESY ROBERT L. FREY

By Maj Jim Geiser, USMC (Ret)

Sgt Frey with a .30-cal. machine gun. Initially assigned to the 1st Defense Battalion as a machine gunner, he served under Maj James Devereux on Wake Island.

Robert Leroy “Bob” Frey was born June 1, 1921, in Kansas City, Mo. The firstborn child of Louis Chase Frey Jr. and Sylvia Mae DeMoss, he grew up in Kansas City, only leaving when he enlisted in the Marine Corps on Jan. 11, 1940, after being turned down by the Navy. He traveled by train to Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, Calif., arriving on Jan. 15, 1940. Boot camp lasted 28 days, and Frey mastered the .30-caliber machine gun and qualified expert with both the Springfield M14 rifle and the .45-cal. pistol.

He then was sent to Hawaii where he joined the 1st Defense Battalion as a machine gunner under Major James Devereux. About four months before the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor and Wake

Island, PFC Frey was transferred to Wake Island.

When the Japanese attacked the island on Dec. 8, 1941, Frey was assigned to man a machine gun and protect the channel on Wilkes Island. He remained unafraid as the sounds of the battle echoed in the distance, but the aerial bombardments of the Japanese resulted in several lacerations across his face. On Dec. 23, after 14 days of fighting, Frey saw Maj Devereux—accompanied by several Japanese soldiers—approaching on foot. Devereux said “Son, don’t shoot,” and Bob Frey knew that after two weeks of intense fighting, the Wake Island Marines had surrendered. Because of his remote location, Frey was probably the last Marine to surrender.

Loaded onto Japanese cargo ships, the Marines endured the 12-day journey in the ship’s deep hold

to the eastern coast of Japanese-occupied China. On Jan. 24, 1942, they arrived at the Woo Sung POW Camp, located 12 miles north of Shanghai, China.

The POWs, housed in groups of 230 men, slept on raised platforms of bare boards with thin, cotton blankets. The Marines were housed separately from the civilians and other military personnel. The Marine officers had their own quarters, but the enlisted men never saw the inside. Morale was kept high as the enlisted POWs were frequently reminded they were Marines; they would stand at attention and salute when officers approached. Their spirits were lifted as they exercised together.

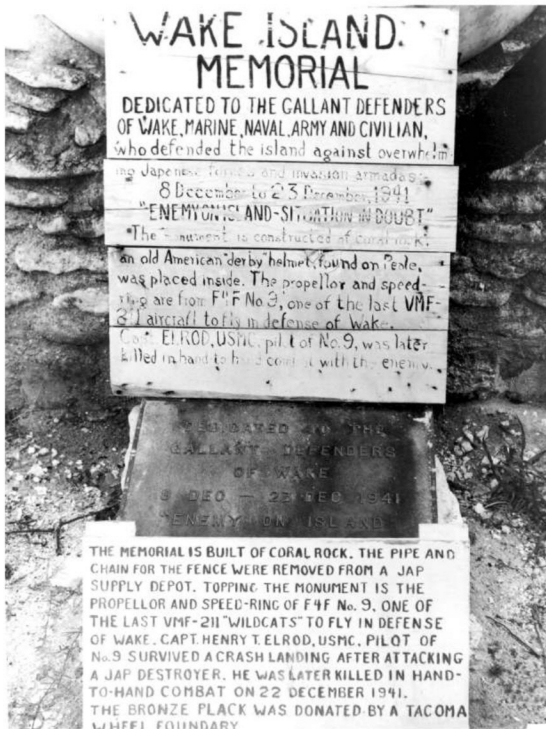
Conditions for all the POWs were deplorable. They received one bowl of rice in the morning and, on some days, a second bowl in the afternoon. Infrequently, they received "watered down stew." The well water was undrinkable, but they were given tea several times each day. The guards provided no medical support and treated the POWs with little respect. Many died of starvation, cholera or other dramatic experiences. On one Christmas day, a fellow POW was killed with a Japanese bayonet while the man stood next to his friend PFC Frey. Frey was then struck in the back with a rifle butt and to this day cannot fully straighten up without experiencing pain.

After some time in Woo Sung, a group of POWs, including Frey, was moved to the Akita POW Camp near the northwest corner of Honshu, Japan's largest island. Conditions there were similar to those at the Woo Sung POW Camp and, for a while, the POWs helped construct a rifle range for the Japanese. A typical day included walking down 200-500 feet into a coal mine, working long hours with a jackhammer in near darkness and then climbing back out. An additional responsibility for select POWs was the maintenance of the guards' vehicles. The POWs, however, frequently would sabotage the trucks by adjusting carburetor settings, adding water to gas tanks and letting air out of the tires. While the guards often remarked that the vehicles "did not run very well," the guards never suspected a thing. Frey said he "was honored to do the job I was called to do and tried to keep my buddies' morale high."

The POWs tended their garden with a small number of tools, including a wheelbarrow. One night, Frey and some of his buddies took the wheelbarrow, stole a container of "straight alcohol" from the camp's shop and took it to their quarters. There they used an old tea pot to mix the alcohol with "Cholera water" and radiator water from a vehicle. All the camp's POWs participated in the subsequent drinking and got "smashed." The evidence was quickly buried, and the guards did not discover them.

During his time as a POW, Frey lost 80 pounds, eventually leaving the camp weighing approximately 105 pounds. Frey's family was not notified of his POW status until May of 1942, five months after his capture.

Japan surrendered on Aug. 15, 1945. When the Japanese guards learned of the surrender, they simply escorted the remaining POWs into the nearby underground coal mine and left them there.



Above: The memorial on Wake Island is dedicated to those who defended the island against the overwhelming Japanese invasion in late 1941. The island was surrendered to the Japanese on Dec. 23, 1941; 49 Marines were killed, 32 more were wounded and the rest were taken prisoner.

Left: Sgt. Frey in 1945. He served in the Marine Corps for six years—45 months of which were as a POW.



COURTESY OF ROBERT L. FREY

Frey and his father, Louis Chase Frey Jr. After the Japanese surrender Aug. 15, 1945, Frey spent six months in the hospital before he could return to his family.

When the POWs later walked out of the mine, they did so as free men—the guards were gone. The POWs walked about 10 miles to the airport. From there, Frey was flown to Guam in a Douglas DC-3 for initial evaluations and rest, and then to Oakland, Calif., for further evaluations. There, at long last, PFC Frey kissed the ground of the United States. He was flown to the U.S. Naval Hospital in Great Lakes, Ill., where he quickly ate two heads of lettuce and drank a gallon of milk. He said, “I was thankful to God for bringing me back to the country I loved and fought for.”

Frey was promoted first to the rank of corporal and then to sergeant before he was discharged from the hospital on Feb. 6, 1946, at age 23. He served about six years in the Marine Corps, including 45 months as a POW. Regarding the surrender and his captivity, Frey simply said, “The Lord kept me in good shape.”

After his discharge from the Marine Corps, Frey served as a three-wheeler patrolman with the Kansas City Police Department. One day in 1971, while he was on duty as a patrolman, Frey approached a large, black limousine in downtown

Below: Frey served as a patrolman with the Kansas City Police Department after leaving the Marine Corps. He now lives in Arizona, with his sister, Judi, left.



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Kansas City to tell the driver to move. The rear window rolled down. Former President Harry S. Truman was in the car and asked Frey to sit next to him. After a long discussion regarding the use of the atomic weapon, Frey looked at President Truman and said, “I want to thank you for dropping those bombs.”

While public service had been Frey’s primary calling, there was another reason he stayed in his hometown—a beautiful woman named Frances Jessie Allen, who later became his wife.

Frey and Frances had two children, Gloria Jean and Robert Leroy Jr., and when they were grown, the couple retired to West Palm Beach, Fla. They stayed together for 66 years until Frances’s passing on Oct. 25, 2012.

Frey now lives in Gilbert, Ariz., with his sister Judi in a house that proudly displays the American flag. Regarding his Marine Corps experience and treatment at the hands of the Japanese, he believes that, “The Lord doesn’t want us to be bitter” against those who harmed him, and that he was just “doing the job he was supposed to do: to protect the United States of America and the freedom of the American people.”

He said that this was a “great experience that gave me an increased appreciation of life and good food.”

Author’s bio: Maj Jim Geiser’s Marine Corps career as a Mustang officer spanned 29 years, including a tour in Vietnam. He is currently the driving force behind two projects to build memorials for fallen military: one for 133 Arizona State University alumni and the other for 56 residents of Scottsdale, Ariz.

