

## THE DEFENSE OF WAKE

OFFICIAL REPORTS indicate that probably no military force in American history, not even the defenders of the Alamo, ever fought against greater odds nor with greater effect in view of those odds. The reports show that during the 14 days of Wake's siege not fewer than 200 Japanese planes bombed and machine-gunned the tiny isle's defenders. This figure does not include those in the final attack, whereof the number is unknown. But as many as 50 bombers, some four-motored seaplanes, attacked the island in a single raid. During the closing days of the siege the defenders had only two and finally one plane. These were patched together between flights. Nevertheless, marine flyers, plus anti-aircraft batteries, managed to bring down at least 12 enemy planes. After the first surprise attack the enemy acquired a healthy respect for this defense combination and gave up low altitude strafing and bombing for high level attack. Even so, until the garrison was overwhelmed by a landing force, the marines, flyers and anti-aircraft batteries continued to give a good account of themselves.

“The first attack on the eighth was made by between 20 and 30 twin-engined bombers, apparently of medium class. These were land planes and possibly from Japan's mandate islands south of Wake. They carried light bombs and were armed with incendiary cannon and machine guns. Four of the 12 Marine planes based on the island were in the air when the enemy appeared in a low glide out of a cloud bank. The other eight planes were being serviced. The enemy went for these at once. Seven were total losses from bomb hits and fire and only the remnants of the eighth salvagable. The landing field was damaged, but remained usable. Also, enemy bombs failed to find Marine stores and aviation gasoline. The gasoline supply of the Pan-American Airways' base was ignited. Casualties in the first raid were heavy. Some 25 persons were killed and more than that number wounded.

“Raid number two followed the next day at almost the same hour. About 20 bombers attacked, these including incendiaries in their bomb loads. Raid number three came before the day was over—this was the ninth of December at Wake Island. Due to vigorous plane and anti-aircraft defenses, damage was less severe than on December 8.

“The third day of the battle, December 12, brought the fourth air raid and the first surface attack.

“As dawn broke, enemy warships started pumping shells onto the flat, virtually shelterless atoll. There is practically not a natural cover against bombardment on Wake. Except for man-made construction, its surface is bare and inhospitable. As the enemy warships opened fire, their aircraft came over in waves. Nevertheless Wake's guns replied with such good effect to this double attack

that a light cruiser and destroyer were sunk. The defenders also had the satisfaction of chalking up a total of six enemy planes destroyed to and including this third day of the battle.

“The effectiveness of the Wake shore batteries, demonstrated by the sinking of two warships, evidently impressed the enemy, for although on that day two transports with escort cruisers and destroyers were sighted, they made no effort to land troops. They held off beyond the range of shore batteries. The purpose of this delay soon was evident. Eighteen planes, making the fifth raid of the battle, appeared from the southwest. As in this day's earlier action, the enemy was badly worsted. Although his bombs did no damage beyond further pulverizing beaches, two of his planes were shot down. Terse official dispatches made no mention of the garrison's feelings, but the results of the blows exchanged December 10 must have been encouraging. And after almost constant action for three days the Marines still had three planes. They lost only one out of the four with which they started the battle, eight having been destroyed on the ground, out of the original force of 12.

“December 11 was another bright day in the defense of Wake. Toward dawn a four-engined enemy seaplane attacked. Marine flyers were ready for it and promptly shot it down. Meanwhile, the convoy reappeared and defending flyers attacked this, severely damaging one of its vessels. A submarine, which was discovered, was attacked with bombs and sunk.

“The enemy did not appear at Wake December 12.

“In early morning of December 13, attacking by moonlight, large four-engined bombers came over the island. They were held off sufficiently by anti-aircraft fire to prevent damage although bombs dropped.

“December 14 was not so heartening. Nearly 50 enemy medium bombers came over in a succession of waves, the heaviest onslaught of the battle. Anti-aircraft and planes brought down three and damaged several others. But of the Marines' three planes, one was destroyed on the ground and another washed out, landing in damaged condition although the pilot escaped.

“The Japanese used incendiary bullets and bombs in this raid and caused heavy damage. By pattern bombing they were able to cover much of the island areas with such large numbers of planes. When the raid was over the Marine defenders had one plane left in service.

“How the Marines were able to patch up another plane in the space of a few hours on the blacked out island with wrecked facilities may never be known. But when daylight of the 15th came the Marines again had two planes.

“During the night the ninth raid was made but no serious damage was done.

“On the 16th more than 25 bombers raided the island and again in the early evening of the 17th. By now practically every installation on the island was heavily damaged. The storehouse with spare parts and other material was gone, burned to the ground. The machine shop and blacksmith shop were wiped out. Frames of some of the buildings were standing but the roofs and walls were badly damaged.

“On December 18 a heavy force of bombers, apparently medium class two-engined craft which had carried out most of the raids, again attacked. They dropped heavy bombs which caused severe damage to buildings left standing.

“Next day there was no raid, but on the 20th large numbers of dive bombers, apparently operating from a carrier, attacked.

“On the 21st the enemy withheld his hand, then came back on the 22nd for the kill. Both land based and carrier operated planes attacked in large force—how large was never reported.

“Among the carrier planes were modern fighters. Nevertheless, against these overwhelming odds, Wake's two planes went up to give battle. Several enemy planes were shot down, but one of the Wake pilots was lost and the second forced down, wounded. Wake had no further air defenses and the enemy closed in rapidly from the sea after that. The island was shelled heavily and continuously, a barrage being laid down, behind which the enemy began a landing attempt.

“Early the morning of December 22 Wake reported in the next to its last dispatch that the enemy was on the island. Then for the first time did the courageous garrison admit the battle was lost, and even then in as gallant a bit of understatement as a brave man ever wrote.

“‘The issue is in doubt,’ the dispatch related. That was the end. The last report said the enemy had gained a foot-hold and that more ships and a transport were moving in. Even in this final phase the Wake batteries blasted away with great effect. The last phrase of the last dispatch was the statement that two of the enemy destroyers had been disabled. In all, the Wake garrison shot down at least a dozen enemy planes and took a toll of at least five enemy warships—three destroyers, a cruiser and a submarine.” LC

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