

Wake, the Alamo of the Pacific

by Bill Altaffer, San Diego

Since 1988, for those not in the US military, it has been virtually impossible to visit Wake Island. Many have tried numerous times over the years. I was one of those hopeful and frequently disappointed travelers. After several failed attempts, I had almost given up. Finally, in commemoration of the 68th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, permission was granted to Valor Tours and Historic Military Tours to bring a group of 141 "country baggers" and military buffs to this most difficult destination. This group represented over a dozen nations and included many individuals both well-known and well-regarded in traveling circles, all who had been trying to get to Wake for years. Rather than mention any names, partly for fear of leaving anyone out, I won't. Many others in the group were "war buffs," people who travel the world to see battle sites and other militarily significant locations. For the most part, we all had some historical interest in the area.

Wake is comprised of three atolls totaling six square miles in area and located in the North Pacific Ocean between Hawaii and the Northern Mariana Islands. Its highest elevation is 18 feet above sea level. It was discovered in the 1500s by the Spanish and renamed two hundred years later by the master of a British trading schooner, Captain Wake. During the 1930s, Pan American Clipper sea planes used it as a refueling stop. Eventually, the US Navy realized its strategic importance and began to use it as a base.

After Pearl Harbor, on December 8, 9 and 10 of 1941, Japanese air raids "softened" the island. Flying from their airfields in the Marshall Islands, thirty-six Mitsubishi G4M "Betty" bombers destroyed much of Wake's airfield and supply depots. On December 11, there was more naval shelling and an attempted Japanese landing that was repulsed by valiant resistance from US forces. Two Japanese destroyers were sunk and the remainder retreated to Kwajalein. On December 21, facing the reality of the situation, the last US military float planes (the PBYs) departed from the island. Two days later, the remaining military personnel and civilian contractors on Wake surrendered to invading Japanese soldiers, the first time in history that US Marines had ever surrendered. A relief task force that had been on its way from Hawaii was recalled when only 425 miles away, leaving the island in control of the Japanese.

The military personnel on Wake were eventually sent to concentration camps in China for the duration of the war. The civilian contractors on the island were detained to build fortifications and defenses for the Japanese. On October 7, 1943, the remaining civilians were brutally executed in response to a carrier strike and an expected invasion by US forces. After the US invasion succeeded, the two top Japanese officers there were hung for this and other war crimes.

Today, Wake is used by the Strategic Air Command as a base for tracking missile launches. It is home to approximately 300 military and non-military support personnel. Other than military use, its airfield has occasionally served as an emergency stop for trans-Pacific flights.

Our tour began in Hawaii where we boarded Continental's Air Micronesia (Air Mic) flight to Guam. Ironically, we flew over Wake on this flight, crossing the International Date Line and losing one day and 4 hours. A day later, our charter flight from Guam would take us back to Wake, regaining that lost day and returning us to Honolulu time even though we would still be two thirds of the way from Hawaii to the Northern Marianas. The night before our flight to Wake, we

attended a banquet at the Outrigger Hotel in Guam. Also in attendance were current admirals and generals as well as survivors of the 1941 invasion of the island. Opening remarks were made by Warren Wiedhan, USMC Colonel (Ret) and by Guam's Governor Camacho. Rear Admiral Biesel, Brigadier General Broadmeadow and Brigadier General Ruhlman also spoke to us.

On December 12, we departed on our chartered Air Mic flight from Guam at 5:00 AM. Continental's top management was also on board, along with a hand-picked crew. They were as excited as we all were. Several of the Wake survivors on board were accompanied by their families. Before landing, the plane circled the atoll several times, allowing passengers seated on both sides of the plane good views of this top-secret missile defense station. Upon deplaning, most of us immediately photographed the Wake Air Station sign at the entrance to the airport lounge. Inside were a small museum, a shop with the usual T-shirts, hats and other souvenirs, all free of tax, and a post office where mail is collected once a week, on Fridays. Our passports were rewarded with a large Wake Island stamp, something I have long coveted. We were then given maps and programs for our 12-hour stay. There are no accommodations for visitors on Wake, so we arrived at sunrise and left at sunset. Box lunches were supplied by the airline.

Our group was divided onto two buses which went off in opposite directions and eventually covered all the sites of the island. One bus started with Prisoner's Rock where we saw a commemorative plaque marking the location of McArthur's meeting with Truman in 1950. The other bus started with a visit to the Drifter's Reef Bar & Grill, passing stores, housing and a church. A tiki statue guarded the entrance to the bar, where we were interested to find that premium beers cost only \$2. Outside the bar, we saw a Japanese bunker that had been uprooted and moved by the last major hurricane to hit Wake.

After our bus tours, we had free time to walk around. Some of our group swam in the lagoon. Wake also boasts excellent fishing and scuba diving. As we were exploring, Wake Islanders frequently stopped to offer us a ride. They were extremely helpful and very interested in our tour. They treated us like important dignitaries. Of its approximately 300 inhabitants, about half a dozen are female. Most of the civilian workers are from Thailand. Signs were usually written in both English and Thai. Some of the sites we saw included the remains of the Pan American Hotel and a ramp into the ocean for seaplanes. Large jet fuel storage tanks were scattered about the island, which also boasts a nine-hole golf course. Remnants of a previous Brunswick bowling alley have become decorations in front of many people's apartments.

Towards the end of the day, Brigadier General Broadmeadow spoke in true military form as John Dale, a 90-year-old survivor of Wake, laid a wreath at the Marine Memorial honoring the past heroes of the battles and the Japanese occupation of the island. We then boarded our flight back to Guam, full of positive memories of the experiences of our short stay. Was the trip worth \$1,000 a day? You betcha! Though from start to finish, it lasted less than a week, it was the best short trip I can imagine. It was very special for all involved: Valor Tours, Historic Military Tours, the US military, the Air Mic crew, the honored veterans, and all the rest of us.