



# The Selfless Defenders of Wake Island

## Handout A: Narrative

### BACKGROUND

The Empire of Japan was formed, or more accurately restored, in 1868 following the Meiji restoration. Before the restoration, Japan had been living in relative isolation in a more or less feudal state as the rest of the world bowled ahead into the industrial age. With the restoration came rapid modernization. By 1905, Japan was a match for any world power, as it showed through its victories in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, Japan had developed a desire to expand beyond its traditional borders in the hopes of exerting its influence across the entire Pacific region. The strong militaristic and nationalist traditions of Japanese culture fueled this drive for expansion.

In the early 1930s, Japan invaded Manchuria and by 1932 was also at war with China. What resulted was a long and bloody conflict that put on display the true horror and strength of the Japanese military.

This aggressive expansion inevitably created growing tensions between the Japanese and the United States. Since the late 1890s, the United States had exerted a strong influence in the region. It had claimed territories across the South Pacific and benefitted greatly from trade in the area. Tensions between the two countries grew as the United States placed tighter and tighter trade restrictions on the Japanese. Finally, after the United States placed an oil embargo on the Japanese, they felt they had to act. Their gamble came in the form of a surprise attack upon the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor Hawaii on Sunday, December 7, 1941.

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The low-flying airplanes were a great surprise to many of the residents of Hawaii on that bright December day in 1941. Seeing military planes was not an unusual sight to the residents on the island, but these planes were different. Flying low to limit radar detection, these planes had a bright white body color and a distinctive red sun painted on the wing tips. They were there for one reason: to kill.

As soon as the bombs left their wings and plummeted toward the earth to rend destruction to the ships, planes, buildings, soldiers, and sailors down below, the United States was at war. Though the official declaration did not come until the next day, the real war had already begun.

All across the Pacific, Japanese forces moved against U.S. installations. Guam, the Philippines, Midway, and other islands were also subjected to the surprise Japanese attacks. One remote Pacific base stood apart from the rest. Its brave defense against overwhelming Japanese forces not only gave the United States time to begin to regroup its forces but also brought hope and

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inspiration to the people of the United States that they could and would triumph over the Japanese. This was all thanks to the brave resistance of the soldiers, sailors, and marines on Wake Island.

Wake Island came under the control of the United States in the late 1890s. Because of its remote location and shallow harbor, uses for the atoll were limited. That was until Pan America, an airline, began to operate a trans-Pacific flight to China. The tiny island proved to be a perfect supply base for the long and arduous island-hopping trip across the Pacific.

In response to the growing military tension in the Pacific, the United States began to militarize the island in January 1941 and constructed a base. The first permanent garrison landed in August of the same year. The mix of marines, sailors, and civilians began to build up the defenses on the base in preparation for an attack they hoped would never come. Winfield S. Cunningham arrived to take command of the forces on Wake Island on November 28, 1941. He had only just begun his work of assessing the island's defense when the whole world changed.

On December 8, 1941 (December 7 in Hawaii because of the International Date Line) the forces of the Empire of Japan attacked. Like at Pearl Harbor, the attack was a complete surprise. Japanese pilots targeted the exposed airfield, destroying twelve of the fighter planes parked on the runway. This amounted to nearly the entire air defense on the island. Only four serviceable aircraft remained.

Following the attack, preparations were made for the evacuation of many of the civilian personnel on the island. The soldiers on this isolated outpost knew that this was their chance to leave. After all, how much use was their tiny atoll, and what could they do against the overwhelming firepower of the Japanese? However, they knew their responsibility was to stay and defend the island, whatever the cost.

More air raids came during the following days, destroying a Pan America facility and a civilian hospital. The soldiers on the island continued to dig in and wait for the land invasion they thought was inevitable. Finally, on December 11, the dreaded attack came. Early in the morning, Japanese ships were sighted off the coast. As the ships approached, Major Devereux, commander of the Maine forces, had his men hold their fire. Once they were well inside their range, they unleashed their full fury. Shells landed amongst the Japanese ships, wreaking havoc and sinking a destroyer. At the same time, the four remaining aircraft on the island began dropping bombs, sinking another ship. With their losses mounting rapidly, the Japanese gave up the attack and retreated in order to regroup.

The American forces let out a sigh of relief, but they knew another attack would occur again soon. The American media lit up with the news, praising the bravery and resilience of the soldiers on Wake Island. Those soldiers, however, were in desperate need of supplies and knew they'd need reinforcements if they were to repulse a full-out Japanese assault.

The Navy attempted to relieve the besieged island by launching a strong relief fleet. However, facing an enemy of unknown strength and wishing to preserve as much of their fighting capability as possible, the squadron was forced to turn back. Wake Island was on its own.

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The next attack came on December 23. This attack was more powerful and well-coordinated than the first. Preceded by a heavy bombardment, 1,500 Japanese soldiers stormed ashore and battered the exhausted Americans. After a full night and a morning of fighting, the Marines knew they had no choice but to surrender.

The price was high. Over 122 lives were lost, including 70 civilians. Those remaining would be forced into Japanese captivity for the remainder of the war. Some were transported off the island to prison camps elsewhere in the Japanese empire. Around 98 prisoners remained on the island, where they would become victims of a senseless mass killing in October of 1943.

Wake Island was a military defeat for the United States. However, the sacrifices of the men on Wake Island were not in vain. They demonstrated to the Japanese the resilience of the American soldier. Their sacrifice inspired countless thousands of Americans to volunteer for the war effort in whatever capacity they could. The phrase “remember Wake Island” became a rallying call for the nation. Through their efforts, the men on Wake Island served the cause of their country, buying the United States time and giving its people the spirit that would eventually lead them to victory in the Pacific.