

MK Honors Heros of

WAKE ISLAND



Editor's note: On August 23, 1995, in a moving ceremony honoring the sacrifice of the Emkayans who served in one of the most courageous episodes of World War II, MK President and Chief Executive Officer Robert A. Tinstman paid tribute to the men who worked, fought, and were taken prisoner or died on Wake Island in 1941. Joined by Velma Morrison, he personally thanked the 31 survivors and 18 relatives in attendance and presented them with mementos in honor of their sacrifice. Here is their story...

In 1938, as the winds of war began to blow across the Pacific Ocean, tiny Wake Island was a remote and quiet outpost. But an important one.

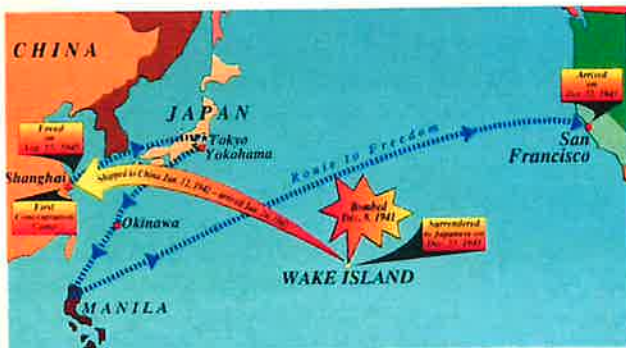
When the Japanese formulated their war plan in 1938 a key component was operation "Capture Wake". Wake Island was essential because it served as a vital stepping stone and the Japanese sought to control the Pacific as far east as Hawaii. The Japanese estimated that the operation to take the island would require only 450 men and take a few hours.

Meanwhile, the United States Department of War had developed a plan called "Rainbow Five" which called for a line of bases on the five Pacific islands of Johnston, Palmyra, Samoa, Midway and Wake. From these strategically located islands U.S. bombers and fighters could take off and protect America's western flank. In effect, the five islands would be a moving wall of fire power that would prevent the Japanese from getting close to

Hawaii, the key center for U.S. operations in the Pacific.

To that end, the United States Navy contracted with Harry Morrison of Morrison-Knudsen Company to form a consortium called Contractors Pacific Naval Air Bases. In January of 1941, MK and associates began to transform the delicate chain of islands into a military fortress.

To say that these men did not know what they were getting themselves into – that they were unaware of the danger they would face – would not be



TOP, aerial photo shows Wake Island. ABOVE, from Wake Island, the captured Emkayans followed a route that was long both in terms of time and distance. RIGHT, Bill Taylor, who escaped from the Japanese in China, is pictured in 1945 with Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-tung, who helped him get to American forces.



accurate. Japanese aggression in the Pacific was well known at that time. Not only would the work they would accomplish on Wake Island be performed under the usual hazards of heavy construction, but it would also be performed at a frontier outpost when the world was on the brink of a global war. As news of Japanese aggression became known, some of the workers were warned by their families not to go. Some were told to come home.

But they stayed. They were hired to do a job and they were going to do it. These are the Emkayans who have helped make MK a legend, and these are the Americans that have made our nation the envy of the world. Some paid the ultimate sacrifice. All were changed forever.

Operation Rainbow Five was implemented too late and the five-island wall was not in place when the Japanese launched their massive attack. On December 8, 1941, at 12:02 p.m., an armada of multi-engine Japanese bombers descended upon Wake Island, bombing and machine-gunning the 1,100 MK employees and the Marine Corps force that was there, immediately killing 30 men and wounding dozens of others. The airfield was badly hit and men and planes perished in the ensuing onslaught.

But the



Japanese had underestimated the tenacity and courage of those island defenders and the Emkayans, side-by-side with 250 Marines, 12 Army soldiers and 60 Navy sailors hung on and fought back for the next 15 days. Day in and day out, waves of Japanese bombers attacked the small island and on Thursday, December 11, a total of nine enemy warships joined the battle and began shelling the island. The Americans responded immediately – scrambling three fighters off the damaged airfield and manning the heavy guns along the coast of Wake Island.

In the naval battle that ensued that day, three Japanese warships were sunk, including a heavy cruiser. Five-inch guns on the island also hit one of the other cruisers and badly damaged a transport. As the battle raged, 17 additional heavy bombers flew over at 20,000 feet, again bombing the island defenders.

Although they expected the island to fall within hours, the Japanese had to withdraw their attacking force, embarrassed and

ABOVE, shortly before he and 97 others were executed on a Wake Island beach, one worker carved the message "98 U.S. PW, 5-10-43," on a rock. **RIGHT**, A memorial a few feet away from the rock lists the names of the executed men.

badly crippled by the inspired group of Marines and MK construction workers. From first hand accounts, it's hard to tell which of those two groups was tougher. Battered by the destruction at Pearl Harbor, the United States Navy was unable to reinforce Wake and the Japanese returned on December 23 – this time with overwhelming force. Destroyers, surface reinforcements, dive bombers and cruisers were pitted against the now battle-hardened defenders. But even

U.S. Marines and Emkayans can only do so much. Outgunned and out-manned, the island finally fell, two days before Christmas, and on December 23, 1941 and the Rising Sun of the Japanese flag replaced Old Glory over Wake Island.

Most of those who survived the fierce battle spent the remainder of the war in prison camps near Shanghai, China or in Japan. However, 100 Emkayans were detained on Wake and forced to work digging elaborate fortifications for their captors. In the months that followed, two escaped, but were never heard from again. The remaining 98 continued to toil – and at one time chiseled a message in stone that remains today.





ABOVE, group of photos show MK President and CEO Robert Tinstman (top left and right); and Velma Morrison, retired director (inset), greeting Wake Island survivors and spouses during MK-hosted luncheon in Boise. Those who attended are pictured in the middle and lower photos.

When the work was complete, the 98 MK men were marched to the beach and forced to dig their own graves at gunpoint. They were then executed. After the war, a Japanese admiral and 15 officers were hanged for this crime.

It's hard to imagine the suffering and privation of those men who were shipped to Shanghai and endured the bitter Chinese winter clothed in nothing but summer

tropics. The beatings, the dysentery, and outright torture took their toll and one third of the MK workers died in captivity.

The survivors were liberated after nearly four years of brutal captivity on August 23, 1945 and began the long journey back to their homeland. The final contingent arrived in San Francisco in October and were featured in that month's edition of The eMKayan Magazine.

Today, 50 years later, the wind still blows in the Pacific – only now it is a warm and gentle seabreeze over that remote and sunwashed strip of coral. Wake Island is again quiet and desolate – but it is not forgotten.

No winds, however strong, can blow away the memories of those sunburned workers who toiled in peace and suffered in war. MK remembers... ©

One Survivor's Story

Editor's Note: One of the *Emkayans* who took part in the defense of Wake Island was Dan Six, a warehouseman, who was captured and spent most of the war in China. He is now president of the Survivors of Wake, Guam and Cavite organization and attended the ceremony in Boise. His story, briefly told, is printed here as a tribute to those who died and those who survived.

Dan Six can discuss more than three years of slave labor, a starvation diet and the constant threat of death, and keep his wits about him.

But he is visibly moved when he recalls one event that happened during his 45 months as a civilian prisoner of the Japanese during World War II.

"Do you have any idea what it means to see your American flag go down?" he said, barely able to get the words out.

Dan and the more than 1,100 MK construction workers and U.S. Marines saw the flag lowered shortly after the Japanese Army overran Wake Island on December 23, 1941.

Fifteen days earlier, Dan, who worked nights, had been awakened about noon by machine-gun fire. He ran out of the barracks to see the attacking Japanese planes.

"I looked up and I could see the fur that was around the goggles of the rear gunner. I said, 'damn, I don't have my rifle.' I had to lay in the dirt. They were machine gunning all over."

Dan and the other construction workers pitched in to help the Marines defend the island, mostly hauling ammunition and filling sand bags.

"We lost 37 guys," he said. "I was told that Japan figured to take Wake Island in about four hours. It took them 15 days."

Following the surrender, the defenders were marched to an airstrip where they sat in the blazing heat for two days, drinking gas-tainted water from 55-gallon drums and eating one piece of bread each day. On Christmas Day, they were marched back to the barracks and two weeks later about 800 were placed on a ship that eventually took them to China.

Dan spent most of the war in China. Working six days per week, 11 or 12 hours per day, he and many of the others from Wake Island constructed a park and rifle range. While Dan weighed 172 pounds when he was captured and only 119 pounds 45 months later, he realizes he was one of the lucky ones.

"We came home with less than 600 of the 800 that were on that first ship out of Wake," he said. "They left 300 on the island and later took 200 of those to Japan. I heard that two of the remaining 100 got away on a boat. The remaining 98 were brought in after work one

night, put down on the beach and machine gunned."

There were several escape attempts while the Wake Island workers were in China but only one was successful. During a transfer between camps, two prisoners jumped out of a rail car. One hurt his leg and was recaptured. The other, Bill Taylor, found his way to territory controlled by the Chinese Communists.

Mao Tse-tung, the head of the Communist forces and who later became the leader of Communist China, helped get Taylor into American hands. He was turned over to the Americans in early July of 1945 and arrived home in Utah on July 28. Taylor returned to China in late 1945 and photographed some of the prisoner of war camps. Today, he lives in Provo, Utah.

Near the end of the war, Dan Six and the remaining Wake Island workers in China were sent to Japan and to a seaport about 300 miles north of Tokyo. There, he and many others were put to work loading and unloading ships. Late one morning, they were brought back from work to a

lunch room. "All the soldiers were in full battle dress," Dan said. "They left us standing there and went to what was an office in the coal yard. They were standing at attention. Three or four of us guys snuck over to a window and inside they had a radio sitting on a silk pillow and above was a picture of the emperor.

"One of our guys was from Hong Kong and he spoke Japanese. He told us the emperor was giving a speech that they were to surrender. I can't tell you how I felt."

Within two or three days, American planes were dropping supplies to the prisoners. The first American to arrive at the camp was Harold Stassen, who would one day be governor of Minnesota, and often a candidate for president. At the time he was a Marine Corps colonel. Stassen and four Marine pilots had landed nearby and came to the camp.

Stassen made arrangements for a train to take the prisoners to Yokohama, which meant they had to go through Tokyo. "We watched the landscape and you couldn't find two bricks on top of each other," Dan said. "Tokyo was as flat as the ground out there."

Dan didn't feel secure until he arrived in Yokohama and, "all those Navy guys were around."

He was feeling even better when, on October 22, 1945, he arrived in San Francisco, back on American soil after a long journey of courage and deprivation.

Of Dan Six and the other Wake Island heroes, MK President Harry Morrison wrote in the President's Memo of the October, 1945 *eMKayan Magazine*:

"They served well and endured beyond measure for their country." ©



Dan Six