

# Wake Island

## A Gallant Defense

By John M. Elliott

Left, the aircraft graveyard at Wake Island photographed by the Japanese after the island was captured. Below, one of the last VMF-211 Grumman fighters which crashed on landing and was left by the runway as a decoy.



**T**he defense of Wake Island under the command of Commander Winfield Scott Cunningham, USN, is a story of tenacity, ingenuity, and raw courage by a few in the defense of their country imposed upon them through shortsightedness, budgetary restraints, and our isolationism policy since WW I. The results of this policy and lack of military preparation was forcefully brought to the attention of the U.S. public on December 7, 1941. Our pitifully small and weak defensive capabilities were evident in the gallant defense of Wake Island by 449 Marines of all ranks. In addition, there were 69 Navy, 5 Army Air Force, and 1,200 civilian workers, all without weapons.

After the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 expired, the building of aircraft and warships accelerated. However, base defenses lagged. The general public first became aware of Wake Island in 1935 when Pan American Airways made it one of the stops on its new flying boat route to the Orient. Finally, in 1940, work commenced on building a naval air station to support flying boat operations and a short airstrip. There was no military defense construction accomplished by this civilian contractor. It was not until early 1941 that work began on building up the defenses of our island outposts in the Pacific.

The advance detail of the 1st Marine Defense Battalion, commanded by Major James P. S.



Devereux and composed of 5 officers and 173 Marines and sailors, arrived August 19, 1941. They found the three islands which make up the atoll called Wake Island – Wake, Wilkes, and Peale – to be very different from the normal atolls of the central Pacific. These islands were covered with stubby trees and thick undergrowth interspersed with large boulders. The 1,200 civilian workmen had hacked out a 5,000-by-200-foot airstrip and

most of the proposed road net. The Marines had to construct the emplacements for the 3-inch and 5-inch coastal batteries by hand. They also were tasked with hand refueling the Army Air Force B-17s being flown to the Philippines in a frantic effort to bolster its defenses. Unfortunately, these aircraft which cost Wake so many hours of vital defensive preparations were themselves trapped on the ground and largely destroyed by the in-

itial Japanese attacks on Clark and Nichols fields in the Philippines.

The first evidence of air defense was the arrival of *Wright* (AV-1) on November 29 (November 28, Hawaii time) with 2 officers and 47 enlisted men from Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 21 at Ewa Mooring Mast (later MCAS Ewa), Hawaii. Major Walter L. J. Baylor was a communications expert, while Second Lieutenant Robert J. Conderman, a Naval Aviator, was to



One of the surviving aircraft over Wake Island.

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supervise the construction of the aviation camp.

At the time these people departed Hawaii it had not been determined which squadron would be sent to Wake Island. Consequently, the personnel deployed to Wake were drawn from all squadrons of MAG-21 (Headquarters & Service Squadron, VMF-211 with F4F-3s, VMSB-231 with SB2U-3s, and VMSB-232 with SBD-1s). In fact, it was not until supplies were actually being off-loaded at Wake that the decision was made to deploy VMF-211. This necessitated the backloading of scouting squadron supplies. In addition, all but two of the personnel were ordnancemen. It was anticipated that mechanics would fly in the rear seat of the scout bombers.

VMF-211 had been flying Grumman F3F biplanes since 1937 and had just received the F4F-3s commencing on October 9, 1941. The squadron pilots had become carrier qualified but had never fired the guns nor dropped bombs in the new aircraft prior to departure for Wake Island. Because of this, some of the items aboard *Wright* were 100-pound, sand and water-filled practice bombs.

On November 27, 12 pilots of VMF-211 (10 officers and 2 Naval Aviation Pilots) were alerted to go to Maui the following day, taking only what would be needed for an overnight trip. The morning of the 28th they took off and were advised by Major Paul Putnam, squadron commanding officer, that they would land at Ford Island where he was to attend a special briefing. Upon returning from the briefing, Maj. Putnam said, "We are going to rendezvous with the *Enterprise* [CV-6] that is now leaving the harbor with two deck-loaded P-40s. We are to observe them try to take off from the deck of the carrier." He further advised them that anyone who couldn't start his F4F was to be flown aboard in a waiting aircraft. This was the first indication that something other than the overnight trip was programmed.

After watching the P-40s launch, the squadron was given the blinker signal to land on *Enterprise*. Eleven squadron F4F-3s landed with Second Lieutenant Holden being flown aboard in a TBD torpedo bomber. After landing, they were all shunted down to the

hangar deck where they heard War Order Number One over the loud speaker system. This advised that the ship was now en route to Wake Island to deliver VMF-211 and that its scouting planes would sink any Japanese ships sighted and shoot down any aircraft encountered.

Of the eleven aircraft brought aboard, five did not have guns installed and none had gunsights. The pilots had the clothes they were wearing. Vice Admiral W. F. Halsey, Commander, Carrier Division 2/Aircraft, Battle Force, ordered his fighter squadron, VF-6, to give VMF-211 one of its aircraft in addition to the necessary guns and sights. They also painted the aircraft in the new paint scheme of blue and gray with black side numbers from 1 to 12.

On the morning of December 4, 1941, while approximately 200 miles northeast of Wake, Maj. Putnam and his 11 pilots took off from the carrier. They were guided by a PBY from a 12-plane squadron which flew patrols out of Wake on December 4 and 5 to cover the approach and delivery of VMF-211. Arriving at Wake Island, they found the air strip was long enough but too narrow to permit more than one plane to take off at a time. There were no shelters for the aircraft and fueling had to be done by hand. Parking areas were rough and unfinished. A plane could be damaged when it was being taxied or even pushed off the strip to permit another to land. Investigating the munitions available, they found Army 100-pound bombs. This was prior to the introduction of Army-Navy standards, and the Army bombs with two suspension lugs would not fit the Navy single-suspension bomb racks on the F4F. The first of many examples of ingenuity solved this problem. The sheet metal suspension bands were removed from practice bombs and fitted to the 100-pound General Purpose bombs. Two bombs were dropped successfully on December 7 for practice. Sleeves were on hand and gunnery in the F4F-

3 was to start the following day. It did, but not for practice!

The 1st Defense Battalion was in equally bad shape. It had no radar, either fire control or early warning. Some antiaircraft batteries did not have all of their fire control equipment, such as height finders. Approximately one-third of the battalion personnel were on the island, resulting in some gun batteries being unmanned.



Original memorial at Wake Island built from the propeller and engine cowl of the aircraft believed to have been flown by Capt. Elrod. The components are now in the Marine Corps Air/Ground Museum at Quantico, Va.

Combat Air Patrols were established and one was out on the morning of December 8 (December 7, Hawaii time), when word was received of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. When this first patrol landed, a second – consisting of Captain Henry Talmage Elrod, Second Lieutenants Carl R. Davidson and John F. Kinney, and Technical Sergeant William Hamilton in aircraft numbers 9, 10, 11, and 12 – took off. While this patrol was above the clouds and on the north side of the island, the Japanese attacked. Thirty-six Mitsubishi G3M *Nell* twin-engine bombers, based at Roi 720 miles south in the Kwajalein Atoll, slipped in under a rain squall. When the bombing and strafing ceased, seven of the eight

aircraft on the ground were burned and blasted into uselessness, including the only two with self-sealing fuel tanks.

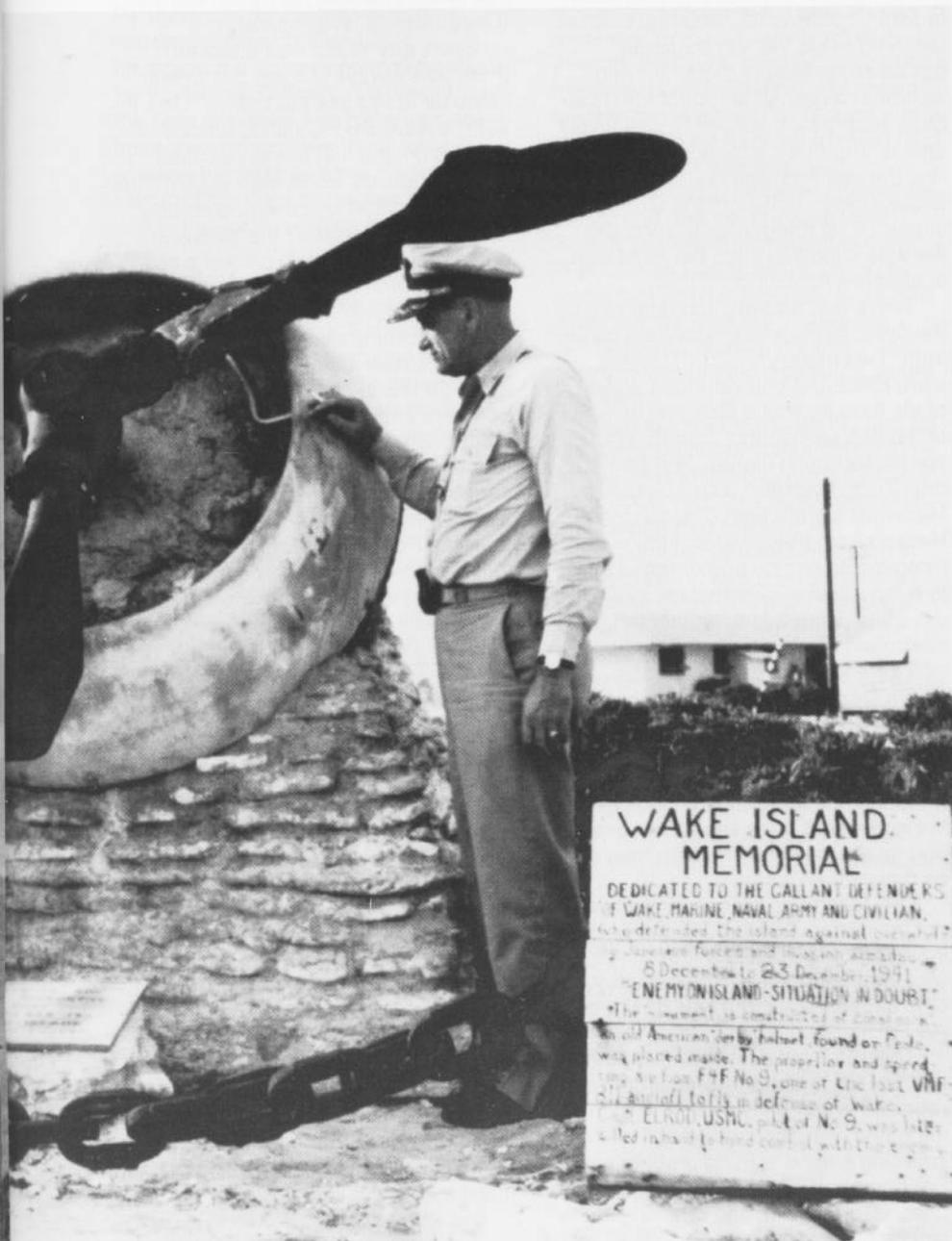
The Pan American Clipper had been called back from its flight to Guam upon word of the Pearl Harbor attack. It was requested that the Clipper make a scouting flight around Wake out to about 100 miles. The two F4Fs which were to provide an escort were hit. One of the pilots was killed, the other died the following day. Though the Clipper received numerous bullet holes, it was able to take off and make its way to Midway Island and Pearl Harbor. This was the most devastating raid, with 3 pilots and 17 enlisted men killed. Six more

were to die from their wounds the following day.

The squadron suffered 60-percent casualties and throughout the campaign was to suffer more casualties than any other unit. These were not all of the problems. The air-ground radio was badly damaged and the two 12,500-gallon aviation gas tanks were afire, as were numerous gasoline drums, making the VMF-211 area a sea of flames. Most of the oxygen supply was destroyed, the aviation spares and tools were riddled and destroyed. To cap it off, one of the two master sergeants, an aviation mechanic, was killed and the remaining one was an ordnanceman trained in SBD-1s. While taxiing after landing, Capt. Elrod was unable to miss a mass of bomb debris and damaged the propeller and engine in the number 9 aircraft.

2nd Lt. Kinney was assigned the task of keeping the remaining F4Fs in the air with the assistance of TSgt. Hamilton. Through herculean efforts, there was always at least one fighter in the air every day to meet the attacks. Burned-out aircraft were scavenged for parts, the aircraft revetments were completed, gun battery positions were further camouflaged and sandbagged, more foxholes were dug, and major communication trunk lines were buried as the island prepared for the following attack they knew was coming.

By the morning of the 9th, aircraft numbers 8, 10, 11, and 12 were available for the dawn patrol. Number 9 was still being repaired. The morning raid that day lost one aircraft to the fighters while antiaircraft artillery (AA) accounted for another. According to a Japanese report, 14 were damaged by AA. The civilian contractor's hospital was burned out and the civilian and Navy barracks, garage and blacksmith shop, advance base storehouse, and machine shop in Camp 2 were all destroyed. The incomplete naval air station on Peale Island took destructive hits on the aerological building, hangar, and radio station. Five Marines and 55 civilians were killed. Ammunition was removed from two of the reinforced concrete and steel magazines and placed in the open to make room for two 21-bed underground wards. Both were in operation by nightfall. A revetment was dug down and covered with tarps and timbers to make a light-proof shelter so work could be continued through the night. Twenty-six bombers hit the island on the 10th. Capt. Elrod shot down two, but a cache of 125 tons of



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dynamite on Wilkes Island was hit, which in turn set off all the 3 and 5-inch ready ammunition on that island.

The Japanese expected to find 1,000 troops and 600 laborers at Wake. They figured, almost correctly, that after two days of bombing, there were five aircraft remaining. They only allotted 450 assault troops and anticipated that it might be necessary to employ some of the destroyer crewmen. The invasion force consisted of 3 light cruisers, 6 destroyers, 2 patrol boats, 2 medium transports, and 2 submarines.

This force arrived before daybreak of December 11. Holding their fire until the flagship *Yubari* was 4,500 yards offshore, the nearest battery on Wake Island commenced firing. *Yubari* turned and was smoking heavily as she disappeared over the horizon having been hit four times. Three destroyers, two cruisers, and two transports approached Wilkes Island. The lead destroyer, *Hayate*, was hit by the third salvo, exploded violently, and broke in two. She sank within two minutes – the first Japanese surface warship sunk by the U.S. naval forces in WW II. The destroyers *Oite* and *Yayoi*, a medium transport and a light cruiser, were hit and retreated. During this 45-minute shore-battery action, VMF-211's four senior pilots (Maj. Putnam and Capt. Elrod, Freuler, and Tharin) had been airborne, each carrying 100-pound bombs. Their purpose had been to intercept any aircraft which might come to the aid of the invasion force. With it in retreat, they bombed and strafed the ships relentlessly.

Both light cruisers were hit as was the *Kongo Maru*, one of the medium transports. The biggest prize was the destroyer *Kisaragi* which blew up in a mighty explosion. Most sources credit this to a bomb dropped by Capt. Elrod. As each fighter expended its two bombs, the pilot would return to Wake, rearm, and fly out again. During this operation, 20 bombs and 20,000 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition were expended. Antiaircraft artillery fire from the ships cut the main fuel line in Elrod's aircraft, which was totally destroyed as he made a beach landing just short of the airstrip. Bullets pierced the oil cooler and a cylinder of Freuler's aircraft, rendering the engine a complete loss.

Just four hours after the landing attempt, 30 bombers attacked. 2nd Lts.

Davidson and Kinney sailed into the fight with the two remaining serviceable *Wildcats*. Davidson shot down two while Kinney sent the third one home smoking. Despite WW I ammunition, the AA guns sent one more down in flames and left three trailing smoke.

An early morning raid on the 12th by two four-engine Kawanishi flying boats dropped bombs around the airstrip but one was shot down by Capt. Tharin. Working miracles, 2nd Lt. Kinney patched up another F4F to flying condition. There was no noon raid and none at all on the 13th, but one aircraft had engine problems at the end of the day so they were back to two. Capt. Freuler, who had been attempting since the war began to devise some means of transferring welder's oxygen to augment the dwindling supply for the aircraft, was finally able to improvise a means of transferring the gas from commercial cylinders to the oxygen bottles of the Grumman aircraft. This dangerous job provided the sole supply to keep the squadron in effective fighting condition.

There was an early morning raid by the flying boats and a noon raid on the 14th. Two more VMF-211 Marines were killed and one wounded. Worst of all, though, was a direct hit on one of the two serviceable aircraft. With the aft section in flames, 2nd Lt. Kinney, TSgt. Hamilton, and Aviation Machinist's Mate First Class James F. Hesson from the naval air station removed its engine and dragged it free to bring another aircraft back to life two days later. The 3-inch antiaircraft guns destroyed two more aircraft.

There was no raid on the 15th.

On December 16, Lts. Kinney and Kliever spotted the incoming attacking aircraft and were able to radio the correct altitude to the AA gunners. Although the fighters had no success, the antiaircraft guns shot down one and four more were smoking heavily as they limped away.

On December 17, one aircraft could not be started. But through the unceasing effort of Lt. Kinney and his crew, it was again operational the next day. One Japanese aircraft was downed by AA fire.

The 18th was an uneventful day but on the 19th again only one aircraft was reported in commission for the morning patrol, with the second still suffering engine starting problems. Four bombers were hit by the antiaircraft guns, with one crashing in the lagoon.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, *Saratoga* (CV-3) was at San Diego with 18 Brewster F2A *Buffalo* fighters of VMF-221 on board. Within 24 hours, the aircraft carrier was on its way to Pearl where it was to pick up other ships as a relief force to Wake Island. Three heavy cruisers, nine destroyers, the seaplane tender *Tanager* with the ground crews of VMF-221, and a fleet oiler completed Task Force 14. Additional troops from the 4th Defense Battalion, along with ammunition and equipment, were embarked. Due to numerous delays, the force did not depart Pearl Harbor until late in the afternoon of December 15 (December 16, Wake time).

Every day Wake was attacked there was always at least one fighter in the air to oppose the enemy. On the 20th, a Navy PBV *Catalina* landed in the lagoon, the first friendly contact with the outside world, with word of the relief expedition which was en route. Major Baylor departed the following day on this aircraft and gained a certain amount of fame as "the last man off Wake Island."

The morning raid of the 21st brought a new element to the fray when 29 Nakajima B5N *Kate* dive-bombers and 18 Mitsubishi A6M *Zero* fighters attacked. These were not the regular aircraft from Roi but from the carriers *Soryu* and *Hiryu*, which had been diverted from their homeward trip after the Pearl Harbor raid. This was followed three hours later by 33 bombers from Roi. When they departed, the island's AA defenses were reduced to four 3-inch guns of the 12 in place on December 8. VMF-211 still had two aircraft operational.

Capt. Freuler and Lt. Davidson were on patrol the morning of December 22 when attacked by 33 bombers and 6 fighters from the Japanese carriers. Freuler shot down one *Kate* but the flames and fragments damaged his controls. As he tried to maneuver his own plane to the airstrip, he looked for Lt. Davidson. A *Zero* was on his tail and Davidson was not seen again. Freuler was shot through the shoulder by another *Zero* and crashed his aircraft on the strip. Wake was without air defense! The surviving members of VMF-211 – by now less than 20 alive and unwounded – prepared to take their place as infantrymen. Recent research indicates that the *Kate* shot down by Freuler was flown by Petty Of-

ficer Noboru Kani, the *Soryu* pilot credited with sinking *Arizona* (BB-39) at Pearl Harbor.

This time, the Japanese took no chances. The invasion force in addition to the 2 carriers, had 9 cruisers, 2 destroyers, 2 patrol boats, 1,000 men of the Maizuru 2d Special Naval Landing Force from Saipan, plus a reserve of 500 more in ships' landing parties.

The decision was made during the night of December 22-23 for the relief expedition to turn back and let the island defenders fend for themselves. At 0800, December 23, the time Cdr. Cunningham was ordering the surrender of Wake, the relief force was but 425 miles away. Reactions varied from astonishment to shame and anger with some even counseling Rear Admiral F. J. Fletcher, Commander, Cruiser Division 6, to disregard the orders and make a dash for the island. Difficult as it was, it was the right decision. The force was not large enough nor was there the pipeline behind it to have made a significant difference to the outcome.

During early morning darkness on December 23, the Japanese landing commenced. Lieutenant Hanna turned his 3-inch AA gun – now serving as an antiboat gun – against Patrol Boat 33, which was being run aground on the beach, hitting it at least 14 times and breaking its back. However, the Special Naval Landing Force got ashore without significant casualties. The nearest Marines, except some from one of Hanna's .50-caliber positions, were the remnants of VMF-211 who took up positions to cover the 3-inch gun against infiltrating attack by Lieutenant Uchida's unit. Before daylight, the VMF-211 position was surrounded, and every man of the one-time squadron was killed or wounded except six.

Capt. Elrod was killed by a Japanese who played dead under a pile of casualties. Among the dead were 10 civilians who had joined the fight. Casualties in Lt. Uchida's unit against the position numbered at least 62, including Lt. Uchida. At 0700, the island commander, Cdr. Cunningham, determined that further resistance was useless and ordered the surrender. It took six hours to get the word to all the pockets of resistance. It was only when Maj. Devereux reached Wilkes Island that he found the Marines there had managed to exterminate or take prisoner all of the Japanese who had landed on their island. Upon reaching the VMF-211 position, he found Capt. Tharin still directing the defense at

0930. Of 10 survivors, nine had been wounded, but all who remained alive were still fighting. VMF-211's final positions, taken up six hours earlier, were still held.

All American prisoners were rounded up and shown little compassion. The military personnel and all but 100 civilians were evacuated to the Empire aboard the *Nita Maru*.

Two Marines of VMF-211 and three sailors were executed by beheading while aboard the ship in retaliation for their defense and defeat of the first landing attempt. The 100 civilians retained on the island to maintain the island facilities were ordered executed by the island commander, Rear Admiral Sakaibara, following the carrier strikes and heavy bombardment of Wake on October 6-7, 1943. The admiral was tried as a war criminal and executed on June 19, 1947. Four of those involved in wielding the swords aboard the *Nita Maru* were tried and sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. The fifth was acquitted. Lieutenant Saito, officer in charge, escaped and was never recaptured. Saito's second in command told the War Crimes Commission that a request had been made before the *Nita Maru* arrived at Wake to take the prisoners off, to allow the prisoner guard to use drastic measures on the prisoners.

Back at Ewa they began to pick up the pieces. The remaining F4Fs were turned over to the Navy to help fill carrier decks. VMF-211 was reconstituted and issued F2A *Buffaloes*. It later received new F4Fs and was sent to Palmyra along with the 1st Defense Battalion. Once again we had the same composition, but without the disastrous results.

In 1942, the squadron combined its old Diving Lion insignia with the outline of Wake Island which formed a "V" for victory. This design was approved and is still used by the squadron as is its motto, "Wake Island Avengers."

With the conclusion of WW II, it was only fitting that the Japanese surrender of Wake Island aboard *Levy* (DD-162) on September 4, 1945, was accepted by Brigadier General L. H. M. Sanderson, USMC. Then-Capt. Sanderson was the first commanding officer of VMF-211 when it was activated in January 1937 as VF-4M. It was at this time the Diving Lion insignia was adopted. Then-Colonel Baylor, "the last man off Wake Island," was also the first American to set foot on the island after the war.

While it is true that the numbers involved were small, their contribution

was great, especially at a time when morale in the U.S. was at a low point. In their 16 days of heroic action, the defenders of Wake Island produced the following firsts:

First to defeat a Japanese landing attempt.

First to sink a Japanese surface warship by aircraft.

First to sink a Japanese warship by shore-battery fire.

First joint air-ground defense operation.

First two-engine and four-engine aircraft shot down.

First Naval Aviator to earn the Medal of Honor in WW II, Captain Henry T. Elrod, USMC.

First units to be awarded the newly established Presidential Unit Citation. ■

## 50 Years Ago — WW II

January 2: The first organized lighter-than-air units of WW II, Airship Patrol Group 1, Cdr. George H. Mills commanding, and Airship Squadron 12, LCdr. Raymond F. Tyler commanding, were established at NAS Lakehurst, N.J.

January 5: A change in regulations covering display of National Insignia on aircraft returned the star to the upper right and lower left wing surfaces and revised rudder striping to 13 red and white horizontal stripes.

January 7: Expansion of Naval Aviation to 27,500 useful planes was approved by the president.

January 11: *Saratoga* (CV-3), while operating at sea 500 miles southwest of Oahu, was hit by a submarine torpedo and forced to retire for repairs.

February 1: First U.S. Carrier Offensive – Task Forces 8 (VAdm. W. F. Halsey) and 17 (RAdm. F. J. Fletcher), built around the carriers *Enterprise* (CV-6) and *Yorktown* (CV-5), bombed and bombarded enemy installations in the Marshall and Gilbert islands.

February 24: First Wake Island Raid – A striking force (headed by VAdm. W. F. Halsey), composed of *Enterprise* (CV-6) with cruiser and destroyer screen, attacked Wake Island.

February 26: The Navy's Coordinator of Research and Development requested the National Defense Research Committee to develop an expendable radio sonobuoy for use by lighter-than-air craft in antisubmarine warfare.

February 27: The seaplane tender *Langley*, formerly first carrier of the U.S. Navy, was sunk by enemy air attack 74 miles from her destination while ferrying 32 Army Air Force P-40s to Tjilatjap, Java.