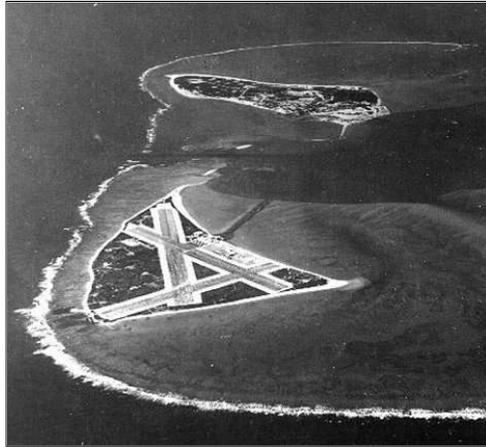


An Island Worth Defending
The Midway Atoll



Presented by
Steve Spiller

Redlands Fortnightly
Meeting #1748

May 10, 2007

An Island Worth Defending

The Midway Atoll

Introduction

Families of World War II uniformed men and women, as a rule, had little understanding of their loved one's experiences. Renewal of lives interrupted prevailed following the war. Memories emerged gradually as veterans reconnected to those with whom they fought side by side, as time lengthened and lost letters were found. Today, these memories provide an essential element to our appreciation of "The Greatest Generation."

One young Marine inspired me to research the Battle of Midway and the history preceding the events of June 4, 1942. For eighteen months, the tiny atoll west of Pearl Harbor was my father's home. The island littered with guano that welcomed wealthy transpacific air passengers would defend itself in the battle that historians say rivals Trafalgar, Saratoga, and the Greek battle of Salamis.

Marion Timothy Spiller stepped onto the extinct volcano in September 1941. The abandoned cauldron encircled by coral "with the most beautiful dawns and sunsets in the world" was his home through February 1943.¹ The son of a Methodist minister, Marion's enlistment in October 1939 provided the opportunity to leave the Midwest for the welcoming warmth of San Diego.

Midway Description

Twelve hundred and sixty nautical miles north-west of Pearl Harbor sits Midway Island, or more correctly, the Midway Atoll. Three fragments of land, surrounded by a reef five miles in diameter, are all that remain above the water's surface of the age-old volcano. Sand Island is the largest of the three, measuring approximately three square miles. Eastern Island is less than one square mile and Spit Island is just six acres. Originally, there was little vegetation, although the

indigenously scrub scaevola grew on Eastern Island. The lack of a fresh water supply delayed any human habitation. Midway was not the idealized image of a tropical island. No palm trees swayed to Pacific Ocean breezes.

The bird population inhabiting Midway is enormous. It is the glossy coated white and black Laysan Albatross blanketing the landscape with the infamous reputation. The albatross is graceful in the air, but the grace is deceiving. On land, this comical bird waddles about the island in a duck-like manner, trips and tumbles, is afraid of no one, and stubbornly refuses to get out of the way. They deserve the familial name “gooney bird.” Equally stubborn are the black-footed albatross with a much more aggressive and nasty reputation. Other winged inhabitants include the Great Frigatebirds who dive into the depths of the water for a fresh catch, and the Red-billed Tropicbird with two long, thin tail feathers. The sooty and fairy or white terns, moaning birds, flightless rails, finches, and domesticated canaries are included, but not all are native to the island.

Discovery

Captain N.C. Brooks made the first recorded landing on Midway in 1857. The island, originally named Middlebrook Islands, received the name Midway in 1869.² Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, in 1867, instructed Navy Captain William Reynolds to take possession of the island for the United States. The captain wrote,

It is exceedingly gratifying to me, to have been thus concerned in taking possession of the first island ever added to the dominion of the United States, beyond our shores, and I sincerely hope that this instance will by no means be the last of our insular annexations. I have ventured to name the only harbour at this island after the present Honourable Secretary of the Navy, and to call its roadstead, after the present Honourable Secretary of State (Seward).³

Transpacific Cable

Midway was nearly impossible to reach by most sailing vessels due to coral reef and shallow waters. Various attempts to create a passage through the coral, beginning in 1869 failed. Not until 1938 could ships enter the lagoon. Despite the difficulty of unloading materials far removed from the island, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company stored coal there during the late 19th century. The Navy Department, by an executive order signed by President Theodore Roosevelt, took jurisdiction of the island and surrounding areas in January 1903. The same year the Commercial Pacific Cable Company established relay stations on Guam and Midway. A lighthouse was built the following year. The cable company's small Midway compound included an office, mess hall, living quarters, library, billiard room, and tennis court. A staff of thirty operated the station. The lack of vegetation, primarily on Sand Island, created challenges. Imported bunch grass reduced the blowing sand and Australian ironwood trees provided windbreaks. Creation of a vegetable garden necessitated the importation of an estimated 9,500 tons of soil from Guam and Hawaii.⁴

The first Marines assigned to the island came soon after the building of the relay station. They were there to protect the station crew and wildlife from Japanese poachers. The Red-billed tropicbird's tail feathers were among the coveted items. Midway was designated a wildlife sanctuary in 1909.

China Clippers

At the height of the Great Depression, Midway played a pivotal role in the advancement of refined and luxurious transoceanic travel. Stiff competition existed among the world's nations to develop aircraft capable of transporting passengers over long distances. Accomplishments such as Dr. Hugo Eckener's *Graf Zeppelin's* round the world journey in 1929, heightened the public's "air mindedness." Pan American Airway's president Juan Trippe added to this enthusiasm by establishing passenger and mail service from the west coast of the United States to Manila. The route required Oahu, Midway, Wake, and Guam as stepping-stones. The Japanese considered the route an intrusion and threat, as tensions escalated between the two countries.

In March 1935, the USS *North Haven* departed San Francisco loaded with a six-month supply of food and equipment to build facilities on Midway and Wake. Accompanying the supplies were 80 skilled carpenters, plumbers and electricians.⁵ Upon their arrival at Midway, they anchored four to five miles beyond the reef, transferring all personnel and equipment to barges towed to the beach. There, tractors pulled sleds with the materials on to shore. When most of the work was finished, twenty-three workers remained on the island to complete the project, while the others sailed for Wake. Completion of the Pam American hotel, perhaps better known as “Gooneyville Lodge,” occurred in 1936.

Sikorsky, Martin, and Boeing built the flying boats, named for the great clipper ships of the 19th century. The *Hawaiian Clipper*, *China Clipper*, and *Yankee Clipper* were part of the fleet of twenty-eight manufactured by the three companies. The inaugural passenger flight from San Francisco to Manila departed Treasure Island on October 21. The bombing of Pearl Harbor forecast the end of this brief excursion, one promoted with idyllic visual images of grass skirted native women and tropical landscapes.

Growth of the Marines

As Trippe and others brought the world closer together, the US military gradually emerged from a period of little change and development. Brodie helmets, adopted from the British and a mainstay of the American Expeditionary force, remained in use nearly 20 years following the end of the War. It was not until 1936 that a modified model was issued with a new leather suspension system and chinstrap. The men carried the trusted and accurate five shot, bolt action 1903 Springfield rifle. Other antiquated and outdated weaponry and ammunition, including machine guns, remained in use.

The Marines of the American Expeditionary Force totaled more than 31,000 at the time of the Armistice.⁶ By 1931 the number was nearly half that. Editorials, calling “these leathernecks of ours are a race apart. . .,” expressed concern over additional reductions – four times the percentage of those faced by the Navy.⁷ As one former Marine noted, the Corps had less members than the New York City Police force.⁸

A Congressional approved board chaired by Rear Admiral Arthur J. Hepburn issued a report in 1938 stressing the need for additional naval bases in preparation for war. The committee determined Wake, Midway, Palmyra, and Johnston Islands were essential to the defense of Hawaii. The defense of Guam, in the board's opinion, was doubtful. The Marines established twenty defense battalions under the leadership of Marine Commandant General Thomas Holcomb. The decision was partly political in nature, as it provided the Commandant the opportunity to increase Marine forces while Congressional opposition to military spending remained high. Midway was to receive 28 officers and 428 enlisted men, twenty-five officers and 420 enlisted men at Wake, and at Johnston, 9 officers and 126 enlisted.⁹ The Third Defense Battalion arrived on Midway in September 1940.

In 1939, the Pacific Naval Air Base Contractors began building or enlarging existing bases on Guam, Cavite, Johnston, Midway, Palmyra, Wake, and Pearl Harbor. The government contracted with industrial designer and architect Albert Kahn to design facilities for the island bases. The Idaho based Morrison Knudsen contractors, renowned for the construction of Hoover Dam, recruited civilian carpenters, plumbers, masons, heavy equipment operators, and other trades to work on Midway and Wake. Projects on Midway included hangars, shops, barracks, mess halls, and three runways on Eastern Island.

President Franklin Roosevelt declared a "limited national emergency" within days of Germany's September 1, 1939 invasion of Poland. A result of the president's declaration was a call to raise troop levels, including an additional 7,000 Marines or a 39% increase.¹⁰ That same month, in Des Moines, Iowa, Marion Timothy Spiller obtained enlistment papers to join the US Army Medical Corps. Parental consent was required for those under twenty-one. His parents signed the papers. Returning to the Army recruiting office, Marion discovered a newly opened Marine office. The lure of Southern California outweighed the reality of training at Fort Des Moines, just five miles south of the capital city. Five days later, on October 6, Spiller boarded the *Rock Island Rocket* bound for the San Diego Marine Base (now the US Marine Recruit Depot).

DIs, close order drill, early morning rifle inspections, and your left and right are part of the daily routine of boot camp, as well as a new language of deck, mess hall, galley, and heads. Care of one's rifle is fundamental for members of the Corps. Spiller's Springfield once belonged to a "sea-going" Marine. Although the rifleman's creed appeared following the attacks of December 7, 1941, the value of the rifle is entrenched into the Marine culture and traditions, traditions of comradeship, *esprit de corps*, and love of country. The creed reads in part,

This is my rifle. There are many like it, but this one is mine.
It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life. Without
me my rifle is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. . . My
rifle is human, even as I am human, because it is my life. Thus,
I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strengths,
its parts, its accessories, its sights and its barrel. I will keep my rifle
clean and ready, even as I am clean and ready. We will become
part of each other.¹¹

Marines graduating from boot camp in 1939 expected to go the Shanghai, Cuba, Samoa, Guam, Alaska or even, Iceland following their training. Marion joined the First Defense Battalion and later the Second before becoming a member of the Sixth. He trained at San Diego, San Clemente Island, Camp Eliot, and Camp Pendleton, including learning to operate the 50-caliber water-cooled anti-aircraft machine gun. In June of 1941, Marion and eleven other Marines traveled to Quantico, Virginia. There they received training in the construction of a mobile structure manufactured at Quonset Point, Rhode Island. For the duration of the war, a hut they built on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. remained in place.¹²

Marion returned to San Diego and joined the other Marines of the Sixth Defense Battalion. They boarded the USS *Astoria* on July 24, 1941 and landed in Pearl Harbor on August 1. A month later, the battalion departed Hawaii aboard the converted cruise ship the USS *Wharton*. On the 11th, they arrived on Midway to replace the Third Defense Battalion. Lt. Colonel Harold D. Shannon, recipient of the Silver Star and the Croix de Guerre for his actions at Belleau Wood,

commanded the battalion. The Sixth numbered 33 officers and 810 enlisted men.¹³ They expected to be on Midway for six months and then go onto Wake.

The island was commissioned a U.S. Naval Air Station on September 1. Already existing when the battalion arrived was a library, PX, power plant, seaplane hangar, and the remaining cable station. The barracks were still under construction. The enlisted men lived in tents, although they expected to move into their new housing before Christmas. In a letter to his brother Paul, Marion wrote, “We have five fellows, roaches, flies, [sic] nats, [sic] ants, and even a few bedbugs in our tent. We all live as one happy family except once in a while.”¹⁴

Spiller’s gun crew included Tong from Texas, Harding from Denver, and Sambos from Des Moines. They were one of about 30 crews operating 50 caliber machine guns. Their gun position was on top of the seaplane hangar used for the PBVs (Patrol Bomber Consolidated Aircraft Corporation) and without a doubt, the island’s largest target. Midway’s overall elevation was less than 40 feet. Each of the two gun positions above the hangar’s main roof consisted of a wooden platform with a two by four railing. A ladder provided access to the rooftop.

Most of the heavy work was in the mornings due to the afternoon heat. “Duty on Midway it was good duty, and we were usually through by noon,” noted former Marine Wiley Sloman, who later served on Wake.¹⁵ Spiller and the other crewmembers spent mornings working on their gun positions. The uniform of the day consisted of shorts, t-shirts, sun helmets, and boots. In November, they changed to long pants and shirts as the weather got cooler.

Finding things to keep a person occupied when not on duty was a challenge. Beach combing, woodcarving, photography, horseshoes, and fishing provided ways to spend time. Expensive fishing equipment sent from the States was no match for a simple hook and line. Marion’s brother mailed him wooden boxes that he carved and gave as gifts. Other, more physical activities included volleyball, boxing, and swimming. A large screen set up at the water’s edge with wooden plank seating served as a temporary movie theatre. An added bonus to the movie experience were the sounds of birds and the water lapping at the coral sand.

Marion worked in the mess duty for a while on Midway. Despite the reputation of military food, he wrote his brother, “The food is good I guess I’ve gained five pounds in the last two weeks.”¹⁶ The men took advantage of the provisions left behind by Morrison Knudsen, including honey, canned fruit, Whitman’s candy, mixed nuts, and buckwheat pancake mix. Beer was available at the aptly named “slop chute.”

Before December 7

November 10, 1941 provided a great diversion from the daily and uneventful routines. It was the Marine birthday. Activities included boxing matches, a special dinner, and cake. The day before Thanksgiving additional aircraft arrived. They celebrated the holiday with a traditional turkey feast and movie. Three days later a storm hit the island. Despite cooler weather and a change to long pants and shirts, sun helmets remained a necessary part of the uniform.

A special guest arrived on Midway in November. On board a Pan American clipper ship was Japanese envoy Kurusu Saburu. His anticipated arrival inspired Lt. Colonel Shannon and Navy Commander Cyril T. Simard to arrange a welcoming party. Armed with their Springfield rifles with fixed bayonets and wearing their Brodie helmets, the members of the Sixth Defense Battalion paraded single file in clear view of the envoy. Apparently the ruse worked. The battalion appeared deceptively larger than their actual number of 800 plus. For three days, Saburu remained in the Pan Am hotel waiting for the weather to clear.¹⁷ On a couple of occasions he ventured out to attend a movie and for dinner. Another greeting during his stay was the repeated fire from a three-inch anti-aircraft battery – the sound deafening to those in close proximity. In Washington, D. C. on December 7, three hours following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Saburu delivered to Secretary of State Cordell Hull the final page of the communication stating the Japanese would not withdraw from China.

December 7th

Early in the morning on December 7, routine patrols took off, including one PBY headed for Wake Island. At approximately 0700, when many were at breakfast, a radio transmission indicated Peal Harbor was under attack. This was no game. Sirens soon wailed. The Marines grabbed their light packs, rifles and steel helmets and headed to their battle stations. Spiller, Sambos, Tong, and Harding climbed to their gun position. There they spent the entire day, with meal breaks in the tower at the one end of the structure. Others were busy blacking out windows, setting up radar, distributing ammunition, digging foxholes, and checking communications. The powerhouse, located near the hangar, served as the company headquarters and communications center. The commanding officer was First Lieutenant George H. Cannon.

Toward evening, the men hung their ponchos over the platform railings creating a windbreak to ward off the chill. There were reports of blinking or flashing lights to the west. A search light picked up a ship off the western reef. The lights were extinguished. A commander on Sand Island reported his battery lit up like a fish bowl from an Eastern Island searchlight.¹⁸ Two Japanese destroyers, the *Akebono* and the *Ushio*, were 3,000 feet offshore. This was the “Midway Neutralization Force”.¹⁹ The *Philippine Clipper*, flying at 10,000 feet, had seen two ships approximately 35 miles south of the island on the plane’s return to the island.

The first salvo hit at 2135. “War had come to Midway.”²⁰ One veteran described the sound of incoming shells, as a “freight train over our heads.”²¹ A shell hit the powerhouse wounding or knocking out those inside; Cannon mortally wounded. Despite his injuries, the Lieutenant did not leave his post until the reestablishment of communications. He was the first Marine of World War II to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The two crews on the seaplane hangar roof were busy firing the anti-aircraft guns. Six direct hits tore through the structure, directly below the gun positions. A plane parked inside the hangar exploded. The intensity of the heat and flames forced the crews off the roof. They abandon their Springfield rifles and anti-aircraft guns. Spiller recalled he was the last one off the roof. Ignoring the steps, he grabbed the ladder railings and slid down. The fire destroyed the abandoned weapons. Two fused 500-pound bombs in the hanger remained intact. Lt. Col.

Robert D. Heinl account written in 1948 assumed the men had time to grab their weapons when he wrote,

. . . Japanese shells had hit the new Sand Island seaplane hangar, the roof of which burst into flame while the Marine antiaircraft machine gunners thereon concentrated, despite enemy fire, on lowering their weapons and ammunition to the ground before flames could consume them.²²

The attack lasted little more 30 minutes. Three others died; ten wounded.²³ For several hours, members of the Battalion assessed damage, initiated repairs, and treated the wounded. The hanger burned for several hours. Spiller's crew found another gun position near the beach.

Fireside Chat

In Washington, President Roosevelt reviewed multiple drafts of his "Day of Infamy" speech, the speech few would ever forget. He promised, "No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through absolute victory."²⁴ In a dramatic use of simple, repetitive language, the President presented the "laundry list" of attacks,

Yesterday the Japanese Government also launched an attack
on Malaya.

Last night the Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong.

Last night the Japanese forces attacked Guam.

Last night the Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands.

Last night the Japanese forces attacked Wake Island.

This morning the Japanese forces attacked Midway Island.²⁵

The following night in a Fireside Chat, the President offered a dark and bleak appraisal of the war declared 24 hours earlier. He challenged a nation in shock and disbelief.

We are now in this war. We are all in it – all the way. Every single man, woman and child is a partner in this most tremendous

undertaking of our American history. We must share together the bad news and good news, the defeats and the victories – the changing fortunes of war.

So far, the news has been all bad. We have suffered a serious setback in Hawaii. Our forces in the Philippines, which include the brave people of that Commonwealth, are taking punishment, but are defending themselves vigorously. The reports from Guam and Wake and Midway Islands are still confused, but we must be prepared for the announcement that all these three outposts have been seized.²⁶

The troops huddled down on Midway listened to the radio broadcast with the entire country. The president's remarks, difficult for most to fully comprehend, offended and angered the men of the 6th Defense Battalion. The president appeared to have written them off. Colonel Shannon reportedly responded to the President's remarks by proclaiming, "We will hold them off until hell freezes over."²⁷

On Wake Island, the First Defense Battalion faced days of uncertainty. The Japanese attack occurred as many were eating breakfast on the morning of December 8 on the island just west of the International Dateline. The Marines, Navy personnel and civilian workers found themselves isolated and alone. They continued to hold out as they endured sixteen air raids between December 8 and December 22. Determined, they sunk two Japanese destroyers, damaged others ships, and downed an estimated 21 aircraft.

On December 15, the USS *Tangier*, USS *Astoria*, and USS *Saratoga* carrying radar equipment, ammunition, and other essential equipment and personnel had left Pearl Harbor headed for Wake. On board were members of the Fourth Defense Battalion and Fighter Squadron 211. The USS *Neches* and four escort destroyers accompanied the relief task force. A PBY from Midway arrived on Wake on the 20th with news of help on the way. At 0800 on December 23, the task force was within 425 miles of the island.²⁸ As a December 23 landing on Wake by the Japanese

advanced, Navy Commander Winfield S. Cunningham and Marine Major James Devaux prepared to surrender.

Acting CinCPac Vice Admiral William Pye ordered Vice Admiral Jack Fletcher to recall the task force. The decision came two and a half hours prior to the surrender. Reactions ranged from astonishment to shame and anger. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison, in his epic multi-volume account of World War II, wrote, “Marine aviators, all set to fly to the rescue of their fellows, cursed and even wept with vexation and disappointment.”²⁹ Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox informed the President. One report states that this was a greater blow to the Commander in Chief than the December 7 attack on Pearl Harbor.³⁰ The task force “retired” to Midway. The *Tangier* arrived the following day. Anti-aircraft machine guns, aviation supplies, additional radar, and 110 enlisted men became part of the force defending Midway. Today, Admiral Fletcher’s decision remains arguably one of the great controversies of the Pacific War, especially in light of the horrific treatment forced on Wake’s military garrison and civilian workers, and the admiral’s subsequent decision to withdraw support for the Marines fighting on Guam in 1944.

Battle of Midway on the Horizon

The Marines moved into bunkers after the attack, rather than occupying the newly constructed barracks. Spiller and his fellow crewmembers lived in one near the breakwater and seaplane hangar. Carved into the coral sand, the bunkers had sandbag and timber reinforcement with sand piled on top as much as nine feet and camouflaged with vegetation. Kerosene fueled heaters and lanterns made the space livable. Occasionally someone would string wire to power a single low wattage bulb.

For those in bunkers near the beach, an unavoidable problem occurred. When the tide changed, water seeped into the gun positions and bunkers, two feet in some cases. There was little opportunity to escape the inherent dampness. Sometimes, ammunition and other supplies required drying out and salt residue removed. In addition to the moisture, the gun crew in one bunker suffered from plugged ears, the culprit – cockroaches. Beer bottles were set out in an

effort to reduce the infestation. In the morning, the bottles contained a surplus of roaches. Despite the reduction of insects, the crew found drier accommodations.

Troop and equipment levels increased after December 7. Scattered submarine attacks on January 25 and in early February resulted in little damage. In March, Spiller's gun crew moved to Eastern Island. Their gun emplacement was about ten yards from larger, twelve person bunkers. The men "used all kinds of materials to make their homes more livable."³¹ Airplane revetments were adjacent to the living quarters. The powerhouse and water distillation plant was about one block away; the galley, mess hall, PX, and first aid tent close to the officer's tent area. A bunker near the powerhouse served as the command post. The crews ate in shifts. Galley personnel delivered sandwiches and hot coffee to pre-designated locations where the crews took their meals.

A pivotal effort by members of the Army Air Corps and the Navy occurred on April 1, 1942. Sixteen B-25 bombers, commanded by Colonel James Doolittle, took off from the carrier *Hornet* approximately 800 miles from mainland Japan; the intended targets: Tokyo, Yokohama, Kobe, Nagoya, and Osaka. The bombing raid resulted in relatively little physical damage. The greater gain was the resulting moral victory for the United States. The Japanese were apparently unaware of the B-25s point of origin. Japan resolved to take Midway and prevent another Doolittle raid. Two days following the raid, the Japanese Imperial Staff approved a plan of attack.

On May 2, 1942, Japan's Imperial General Headquarters ordered the invasion and occupation of the Western Aleutian and Midway Islands. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the Harvard educated naval officer and architect of the December 7 attacks, commanded a joint Navy – Army task force. With him was Vice-Admiral Chuichi Nagumo. One hundred and sixty-two warships, including submarines, carriers, battleships, cruisers, transports, and destroyers formed the main body. Among the ships were twelve transports carrying the 5,000 member Midway Occupation Force. In the meantime, Admiral Chester Nimitz assembled 76 ships, some damaged from previous encounters with the Japanese, including the Battle of the Coral Sea. A wounded and

nearly crippled United States military would face an armada confident and poised to claim the “Island of the Rising Sun.”

The Navy Combat Intelligence Unit, known as Station Hypo, occupied the basement of the administration building at the Pearl Harbor Navy Yard. Forty brilliant linguists, mathematicians and other members of the unit spent long hours with little sleep in an effort to break Japanese codes. Directed by Commander Joseph J. Rochefort, Jr., the men found themselves in an unventilated room identified as “The Dungeon.” Their job was a process of elimination, a process with a success rate of 15%. The designation “AF” continued appearing in transmitted messages. Rochefort’s team assumed “AF” represented Midway. The team came up with a simple, yet effective method to test their assumption. An unsecured false message sent from Midway indicated problems with the island’s water distillation equipment. A subsequent Japanese message revealed AF had serious water problems. The unit’s assumptions confirmed Admiral Nimitz prepared for battle.

The Admiral anticipated an amphibious assault. On May 2, he conducted a thorough examination of the Midway facilities, visiting nearly every bunker, ammunition dump, and battery. He requested Shannon and Simard submit a list of items essential to the island’s defense. They confidently submitted their request on May 7. Two weeks later equipment began arriving.

In the meantime, Marines manufactured explosive devices. Practical ingenuity prevailed, making use of what ever was at hand. Sections of pipe filled with blasting gelatin and sealed at the ends were virtual firecrackers. Left over beer bottles became Molotov cocktails. Landmines made from cigar boxes with an explosive material and batteries soon littered the beach. Larger boxes, filled with nails, spikes, rebar, glass, rocks, and three pounds of dynamite, required a remote electrical charge. The dynamite fumes created headaches among the men assembling the devices. As an alternative to the electrical firing, bull’s eyes painted on the side of the box were easy targets for the skilled riflemen. Unintentional casualties resulted from gooney birds triggering the mines.

Planes made regular searches several hundred miles out from the island. On May 19, unidentified aircraft were spotted and the alarm sounded. The following day in a letter to Shannon and Simard, Admiral Nimitz cautioned the commanders that an attack on the 28th was imminent. His letter also included notice of promotions for the two officers. On the 22nd, an accident caused many to believe the Japanese arrived prematurely. Three hundred seventy-five thousand gallons of gasoline exploded. The distribution system damaged, refueling the airplanes required use of 55-gallon cans.

Reinforcements and equipment arrived May 25 aboard the USS *St. Louis*. Tanks, antiaircraft guns, sandbags, and barbed wire were off-loaded. Carlson's Raiders, a Marine "special forces" unit arrived, ready for battle. The USS *Kittyhawk* anchored beyond the reef on the 26th. An assortment of planes crammed the ship. Three days later, more aircraft arrived. Once off loaded, the abundance of planes required wing tip-to-wing tip parking.

Shannon insisted on the distribution of massive amounts of barbed wire. To many, it was too much. Multi layers of wire encircled the five-mile reef circumference. Reuse of old barbed wire was essential to the Colonel's plans. Littering the brush was the old wire.

Colonel Shannon issued a memorandum on May 30, 1942 to the defense battalion. The seasoned commander inspired the battalion in words spoken by generations of officers on the eve of battle. He warned that an,

. . . all-out-attack may start at any hour. . . It is the tenaciousness on the part of the individual soldier and the will to win, coupled with the cool and deliberate action and shooting that wins battles. . . We have the opportunity of a lifetime to reflect glory on our Corps and ourselves by not only accomplishing our mission, but also by the damage and destruction we can inflict on the enemy. . . Keep cool, calm and collected; make your bullets count. . . Our President, our Country, our Corps, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet are depending on us and we will not let them down.³²

Battle of Midway

The Japanese maintained radio silence, catching their force unaware that the US Navy was much closer to their fleet than expected. General quarters on Midway sounded around 0600. One hundred and eight Japanese planes launched from the Japanese carriers headed toward Midway. U.S. planes on the island got into the air before the Japanese planes arrived at 0630 and firing commenced. Other ship based aircraft launched from USS *Yorktown*, *Hornet*, and *Enterprise*. Spiller was at work running the water pump for the 50-caliber gun. When the Eastern Island powerhouse blew up it was difficult to see due to the dust. Once the dust cleared, firing recommenced. Heintz noted, “. . . all this enemy air activity had not been carried out without cost. . . every low-flying enemy attack was made through curtains of 37 mm., 20-mm., and .50 caliber antiaircraft fire.”³³

A crew of Navy photographers, led by Navy Commander John Ford, were on the island. They captured the first color photographs ever taken in battle.³⁴ On June 4, Ford was at the powerhouse on Sand Island relaying important information via telephone to the command post. Nearby was the repaired seaplane hangar. The academy award winning filmmaker witnessed the entire battle from this position. In an oral interview, Ford noted that the Japanese,

got the seaplane hangar right away. . . A Zero flew about 50 feet over it and dropped a bomb and hit it, the whole thing went up. I was knocked unconscious . . . I pulled myself out of it. I did manage to get the picture.³⁵

Crews rushed to put out the fire. Ford's sailors filmed Marines hastily raising the American flag during the attack as thick black smoke billowed in the background. The attack on the island was over in 30 minutes, with 17 minutes of intense fighting. The command post on Eastern Island received a direct hit, instantly killing the commanding officer, Major William W. Benson. Damage, in addition to the seaplane hangar, included fuel oil storage tanks, ruptured fuel lines, a squadron warehouse, communications facilities, and the destruction of the Navy dispensary, a galley, and mess hall. The runways remained virtually intact. One lasting image was the funeral

held on the beach and the subsequent somber burial at sea. Seven members of the Sixth Defense Battalion died and twenty-eight wounded.³⁶

The Japanese planned a second aerial attack on the island. Several planes remained on the carriers preparing to arm. Learning the US Navy was not in Pearl Harbor as assumed; Nagumo ordered his planes in reserve rearmed to target the US ships, rather than with the armament required for the second attack on Midway. By this time, the planes from the first wave were returning. The decks, cleared of the reserve aircraft, now had room for the returning planes. The “back and forth” indecision by the Admiral Nagumo had disastrous results. American planes were headed for the Japanese fleet. The ensuing battle, some one hundred and fifty miles from Midway, was a battle of air power and carriers. There was no second or third aerial attack on the island.

The Marines on Midway waited for the return of their pilots. The US aerial forces were devastated. One squadron lost all fifteen planes and crews, except for one man picked up in the ocean a few days later. In total, the US lost 147 planes. The Japanese lost 332 aircraft, 5 ships; four damaged, and estimated 2500 dead or wounded.³⁷ The USS *Yorktown* and USS *Hamman* lay broken at the bottom of the Pacific. The confident Japanese armada failed in its attempt to capture the island. The Japanese people would not learn of the defeat until much later. In a letter to his parents written on June 9, Spiller noted, “I suppose by now you know what happened out here. Well things are back to normal now as if nothing had happened.”³⁸

The Midway defenders escaped the treatment inflicted on the Wake defenders. The Sixth Defense Battalion received a Navy Unit Commendation for their heroic efforts. The commendation read in part, “For outstanding heroism in support of military operations prior to and during the Battle of Midway. . . thereby contributing greatly to the success of operations conducted from this base. The high standards of courage and service maintained by the Sixth Defense Battalion reflect the highest credit upon the United States Naval Service.”³⁹

Aftermath

In November 1942, a *Life* magazine reporter wrote of his visit to the island, “Eleven months of war have passed over Midway. Its Marine garrison has grown tough in the ways of war.”⁴⁰ The men were busy. Midway became a submarine base a month following the Battle, in addition to serving as a naval air station. Facility repair and rebuilding occupied much of the battalion’s time. A shipment of Quonset Huts arrived on July 17. For several weeks, Spiller worked on assembling the huts. The twenty-two year old Marine veteran returned stateside in February 1943. However, the Sixth Defense Battalion remained on Midway. On February 1, 1946, they were re-designated as Marine Barracks, Naval Base, Midway.

By necessity, offensive action in the Pacific replaced the “wait and see” defensive strategy. Gone were the M1917 IA helmets; exchanged for the McCord Radiator manufactured steel M1 model. Semi-automatic M-1 rifles replaced outdated single-shot Springfields. For Marion Spiller, his two-year enlistment would stretch to six years. Six Marine Divisions formed, each with thousands of men. Spiller joined the Fourth Marine Division. Days and weeks of training followed, first on the mainland, and later, in Hawaii. Marines aboard ships off California’s coast scrambled down cargo nets and ladders to waiting Higgins boats; storming ashore on Pendleton’s beaches. In Hawaii, two divisions establish virtual cities: the Fifth on Hilo and the Fourth on Maui. The names of other islands became all too familiar to the Marines and the American public. Guadalcanal, Roi Numur, Saipan, Pelaiu, Tinian, Tarawa, Guam, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa lay ahead. *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek* carried accounts of D-day and D-day + 1, D-day + 2. Letters to home, run by the censors, contained phrases such as, “it was a little hot the first night for us and it rained but that couldn’t cool us off, it was the wrong kind of heat” and “I have seen some action – a few hard, hard, days in which I saw more than imagined I ever would. I do not think any man can exactly explain combat. Its beyond words. . . It makes you feel mighty small, helpless and alone.”⁴¹ The experiences faced by those in battle, the endless pounding of exploding shells, sleepless days and nights filled with terrorizing fear, the lack of a hot shower or hot meal, the dirt, the stench, and the flies, and the emotions at the sight of fellow Marines and Japanese dead and dying was beyond the understanding of those at home.

Midway stayed a Naval Air Facility and submarine base until its closure in 1997. Underwater listening equipment tracked Soviet submarines during the Cold War. Added housing, school,

chapel, a galley to feed 1,000, and recreation facilities serviced the estimated 3,500 living on Sand Island during Vietnam Era, including dependants. The birds remained a serious hazard to the safety of pilots and their aircraft. In one incident, they jammed a plane's landing gear requiring a belly landing. Planes often landed at night to prevent disturbing the birds anymore than necessary. All manner of attempts failed to eliminate the birds. Shooting off mortars and creating an irritant smoke by burning tires were unsuccessful. As late as the 1960's, a 1,000-member Seabee unit from Port Hueneme moved the albatross chicks from Sand to Eastern Island at the request of a wildlife biologist. Their commanding officer recalls his men gathered the birds in burlap sacks, hauled them aboard launches, and transported them the two miles across the lagoon. One Seabee even made a concrete nest, making sure to scratch his initials into the wet cement.⁴² The birds, inherent honing instincts prevailed. Today, an enormous model of a Laysan albatross stands proudly on Sand Island – emphasizing the island's rule by its native inhabitants.

On May 28, 1987, Midway was designated a National Historic Landmark, one of 13 NHL structures or sites in the Pacific, including the *Arizona Memorial* and the nuclear bomb pits on Tinian. The Midway landmark designation incorporates the sunken USS *Yorktown*, USS *Hamman*, and the Japanese ships as well as any future discoveries on the ocean floor.

The Commission on Base Realignment and Closure announced a 1993 closure of the Midway Naval Air Facility. Environmental cleanup, universal to base closures, soon followed. Fuel tank and pipe removal, rodent extermination, water and soil decontamination, asbestos and lead abatement, and debris removal was all part of the cleanup. Demolished were one hundred eleven buildings. No structures remained on Eastern Island. Structures on Sand Island still standing include the seaplane hangar, batteries, magazines, pillboxes, a Quonset hut, coastal gun emplacements, and a concrete structure built by the Commercial Pacific Cable Company. The Historic American Buildings Survey and the Engineering Survey conducted studies in the early 1990s. Considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places are several buildings, including the seaplane hangar. Unfortunately, inappropriate measures to secure the historic structures occurred during the closure process. Maintenance and upkeep is dependent of the availability of volunteer help.

Today

Midway is part of the Pacific Remote Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex, first established by Theodore Roosevelt in 1909 as the Hawaiian Island Bird Reservation and includes Baker, Howland, Jarvis, and the Midway Islands, the Johnston and Palmyra Atolls, and Kingman Reef. Midway is a sanctuary for 15 species of migratory seabirds, shore birds, monk seals, and green turtles. The administration of the island by Fish and Wildlife Service has come under harsh criticism. The preservation of the structures and visitors to the island are at odds with the Service's goals. A vocal critic is the International Midway Island Memorial Association. Founded in 1992, the Association's goals are to "create an awareness of Midway, to honor, and preserve the memory and values of the Battle of Midway," including supporting the preservation and encouragement of visitors.⁴³

From 1996 to January 2002, the island was open to visitors. With the neglect of structures, the Midway Foundation sought Congressional support to transfer jurisdiction from the Fish and Wildlife Service to another agency within the Department of the Interior. Dr. William S. Dudley – former director of Naval History and Naval Historical Center spoke before congressional committee saying that, ". . . I appear before you, representing the International Midway Memorial Foundation, to ask your consideration of the reopening of Midway atoll to public visitation."⁴⁴ Congressman John T. Duncan of Tennessee and Senator Richard Lugar introduced a resolution, although unsuccessful, allowing the Interior Department to remove the US Fish and Wildlife Service jurisdiction over Midway.

A visit to Midway in June 2005 by Pittsburg *Post-Gazette* photographer Bill Campbell revealed crumbling concrete structures, with the historic command post deteriorating into a skeleton of rebar stripped of its flesh.⁴⁵ Massive piles of debris are reminders of the inherent complexities created by base closures. Despite the previously attempted lead abatement, lead paint remains a deadly toxin. Paint chips are easy targets for foraging fowl. National Public Radio, December 2006, reported 10,000 Laysan chicks could die annually resulting from the ingestion of the paint.⁴⁶

There is good news. On June 15, 2006 a resolution, signed by President George W. Bush, created the Northwest Hawaiian Marine National Monument of which Midway is a part. Administration of the Monument is the responsibility of the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Hawaiian Department of Land and Natural Resources, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.⁴⁷ A 182-page draft Interim Visitors Service Plan issued on December 8, 2006, contains provisions to allow visitors to the island and protect the wildlife.⁴⁸ On June 4, 2007, a Continental Airlines' jet will land on Midway. Those onboard, including veterans, will join in a ceremony in recognition of the 65th Anniversary of the Battle of Midway.

Conclusion

The Battle of Midway remains a significant chapter in our history. Inherent in Roosevelt's "Europe First" policy was that the war in the Pacific was secondary to the European Theatre. Had the Japanese succeeded, the entire outcome of the wars in the Pacific and Europe would have been decidedly different. Author Peter G. Tsouras, in his book *Rising Sun Victorious - The Alternate History of the How the Japanese Won the Pacific War*, brought together ten noted historians to bring an authoritative perspective to just such a victory.⁴⁹ The capture of Midway would force the abandonment of Pearl Harbor and a retreat to the West Coast. The invasion of the Aleutians was inevitable. Some forecasted the loss of the Panama Canal. The American public, already demanding retribution for the attacks of December 7, would insist attention be turned to the Pacific. Less equipment and manpower would be available for Europe.

James R. Schlesinger, former secretary of defense spoke in 2001 at a dinner celebrating the 61st anniversary of the Battle of Midway. "Midway was far more than a decisive naval victory. It was far more than the turning of the tide in the Pacific war. In a strategic sense, Midway represents one of the turning points of world history and in that role it remains underappreciated."⁵⁰ Schlesinger argued that the significance of the battle is lost in the celebration of D-day.⁵¹ Although the invasion of Normandy occurred two years after the Midway confrontation, the date of June 6, 1944 overshadows the events of June 4, 1942. .

For the Midway defenders, who last met in September 2004, it is the words of Walter Lord that describes those worthy of recognition of an island worth defending, “They had no right win yet they did, and in so doing they changed the course of the war. . . “⁵²

Endnotes

- ¹ Scherschel, F. (1942, November 23). Life on Midway. *Life Magazine*, 13, 119.
- ² Speulda, L.A. (1997). Midway National Historic Landmark: Transfer and Transformation. *CRM Online*, 20(9). Retrieved December 31, 2006 from <http://crm.cr.nps.gov/archive/20-9/20-9-18.pdf>
- ³ Resture, J. (2005). *Midway Island History*. Retrieved February 6, 2007 from <http://www.janeresture.com/midway/>
- ⁴ The Commercial Pacific Cable Company on Midway. Retrieved February 8, 2007 from <http://www.fws.gov/midway/past/cable.html>
- ⁵ Borger, J.G. (n.d.) The Pacific Bases. *Pan American World Airways History*. Retrieved January 15, 2007 from <http://www.panam.org/default1.asp>
- ⁶ Lejeune, J.A. (1931, November). The United States Marine Corps. *Current History*. p.217.
- ⁷ Semper Fidelis *Saturday Evening Post* (1933, February 18), p.20.
- ⁸ Sloan, Bill. (2003). *Given up for Dead – American’s Heroic Stand at Wake Island*. New York: Bantam Books, p. 14.
- ⁹ Melson, Major Charles D., (Ret). (1996). *Condition Red: Marine Defense Battalions In World War II* (World War II Commemorative Series). Washington, D.C.: Marine Corps Historical Center, p.1.
- ¹⁰ Tyson, C.A. (1965). *A Chronology of the United States Marine Corps 1935-1946*. Washington, D.C: History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, p. 5.
- ¹¹ Marine Rifle Creed. Retrieved March 25, 2007 from <http://www.us.marines.com/rifle-creed.html>.
- ¹² Spiller, M.T. (2004). *Time in the Marine Corps*. Unpublished manuscript. p.61.
- ¹³ Shaw, Henry I., Jr. (1991). *Opening Moves: Marines Gear Up For War* (World War II Commemorative Series). Washington, D.C.: Marine Corps Historical Center, p. 17.
- ¹⁴ Spiller, M.T. Personal communication to Paul Spiller. (1941, October 12).
- ¹⁵ Sloan, Bill. p.11.
- ¹⁶ Spiller. (1941, October 12).
- ¹⁷ Spiller (2004), p.73.
- ¹⁸ Heintz (1948). Heintz, Lt. Col. Robert D., Jr. (1948). *Marines at Midway*. Appendix IV: Events at Battery D, 7 December 1941, Lieutenant Colonel Jean H. Buckner. Washington, D.C.: Historical Section Division of Public Information Headquarters. U. S., p.50.
- ¹⁹ According to Heintz (1948), the two Japanese ships were the Ushio and the Akebono, p.12, whereas Young (1998) *First 24 Hours of the War in the Pacific*. Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, lists the two ships as the Ushio and the Sazanami, p.116.
- ²⁰ Heintz (1948), p.11.
- ²¹ Ibid., p.49
- ²² Ibid., p.13.
- ²³ Speulda.
- ²⁴ Pearl Harbor – FDR’s “Day of Infamy” Speech. Retrieved January 8, 2007 from <http://www.umkc.edu/lib/spec-col/ww2/PearlHarbor/fdr-speech.html>.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ *On the Declaration of War with Japan*. (1941, December 9). Fireside Chats of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Retrieved January 8, 2007 from <http://www.mhric.org/fdr/chat19.html>.
- ²⁷ Spiller, (2004), p.77 .
- ²⁸ Heintz, Lt. Col. R. D, Jr. (1947). *The Defense of Wake*. Washington, D.C.: Historical Section Division of Public Information Headquarters. U. S. Marine Corps, p.38.
- ²⁹ Morison, Samuel Eliot. (1948). *The Rising Sun in the Pacific*. Boston: Little, Brown Company, p. 252.
- ³⁰ Prange, Gordon W. (1982). *Miracle at Midway*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, p.6.
- ³¹ Scherschel. p.121.
- ³² Battalion Instruction Memorandum Number 3 – 1942. Impending Attack By Japanese Forces 30 May 1942. <http://home.comcast.net/~r2russ/midway/shannon-s.jpg>.
- ³³ Heintz (1948), p.32.
- ³⁴ Battle of Midway. *Life Magazine*. (1942, July 27), p. 32-34.
- ³⁵ Oral History, Battle of Midway, John Ford. Retrieved January 8, 2007 from <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq81-8b.html>.
- ³⁶ Heintz (1948), p.42.

- ³⁷ Prange, p.396.
- ³⁸ Spiller, M.T. Personal communication to Edwin and Elizabeth Spiller. (1942, June 9).
- ³⁹ Heinl (1948). Appendix III Navy Unit Commendation, 6th Defense Battalion, FMF, p. 47.
- ⁴⁰ Scherschel, p.119.
- ⁴¹ Carroll, Andrew. Ed. (2001). *War Letters-Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars*. New York: Scribner, p. 233. Personal communication Pvt. Paul Curtis to Mitchell Curtis. (1944, May 28).
- ⁴² Interview, Captain Bill Sturman, (Ret.) U.S. Navy. (2007, January 13).
- ⁴³ International Midway Memorial Foundation: *The Foundation Goals*. Retrieved February 3, 2007 from <http://www.immf-miday.com/foundation.html>.
- ⁴⁴ Dudley, W.S. (2003). *The Battle of Midway: A Global Turning Point*. Testimony on the Historical Significance of Midway Atoll.
- ⁴⁵ Interview, Bill Campbell, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. (2007, March 11).
- ⁴⁶ **Shogren, E. (2006, December 29).** Midway, a Protected Area, Is Also Under Funded. *All Things Considered*. National Public Radio.
- ⁴⁷ *Establishment of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Monument* A Proclamation by the President of the United States of America (2006, June 15). www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/06/20060615-18.html.
- ⁴⁸ *Draft Interim Visitors Service Plan for Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and the Battle of Midway National Memorial and the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument's Midway Atoll Special Management Area*. (2006, December 8). Prepared by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and Pacific Islands Division of External Affairs and Visitors Services.
- ⁴⁹ Tsouras, Peter G., Ed. (2001). *Rising Sun Victorious – The Alternate History of How the Japanese Won the Pacific War*. London: Greenhill Books.
- ⁵⁰ Schlesinger, J. R. (2003, June 5). *Midway in Retrospective: The Still Under-Appreciated Victory*. Retrieved January 16, 2007 from <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq81-112.html>.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Lord, Walter. (1967). *Incredible Victory*. NY: Harper & Row.

Selected Bibliography

- Carroll, Andrew. Ed. (2001). *War Letters-Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars*. New York: Scribner.
- Decker, Julie and Chris Chie. (2005). *Quonset Hut – Metal living for a Modern Age*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Heinl, Lt. Col. Robert D., Jr. (1948). *Marines at Midway*. Washington, D.C.: Historical Section Division of Public Information Headquarters. U. S. Marine Corps.
- Hoppes, Jonna Doolittle. (2005). *Calculated Risk: The Extraordinary Life of Jimmy Doolittle – Aviation Pioneer and World War II Hero*. Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press LLC.
- Lord, Walter. (1967). *Incredible Victory*. NY: Harper & Row.
- Melson, Major Charles D., (Ret). (1996). *Condition Red: Marine Defense Battalions In World War II* (World War II Commemorative Series). Washington, D.C.: Marine Corps Historical Center.
- Morison, Samuel Eliot. (1948). *The Rising Sun in the Pacific*. Boston: Little, Brown Company.
- Prange, Gordon W. (1982). *Miracle at Midway*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.

- Shaw, Henry I., Jr. (1991). *Opening Moves: Marines Gear Up For War* (World War II Commemorative Series). Washington, D.C.: Marine Corps Historical Center.
- Sloan, Bill. (2003). *Given up for Dead - America's Heroic Stand at Wake Island*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Smith, Alan and Gerald A. Meehl. (2004). *Pacific War Stories - In the Words of Those who Survived*. New York: Abbeville Press.
- Toland, J. (1970). *The Rising Sun: The Decline & Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936 – 1945*. New York: Random House.
- Tsouras, Peter G., Ed. (2001). *Rising Sun Victorious – The Alternate History of How the Japanese Won the Pacific War*. London: Greenhill Books.
- Young, Donald J. (1998). *First 24 Hours of the War in the Pacific*. Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press.