



Tactical Defeat or Strategic Victory: The Battle of Wake Island- Dec 8-23, 1941

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Given the constrained environment the US Armed Forces operate in would it be possible or even strategically feasible to relieve a cutoff force. This study investigates this scenario by using the historical example of Wake Island.

Wake Island is an insignificant strip of coral located in the central Pacific. However, it gained strategic significance during prewar planning. From its location, Wake Island could dominate the sea-lanes through the central Pacific.

After the beginning of hostilities in 1941, the Japanese attacked Wake Island by air for three days before attempting an amphibious assault on 11 December. Miraculously, the defenders repulsed the Japanese. The only time during the Pacific War that an invasion attempt was defeated. Humiliated by the defeat, the Japanese returned on 23 December with a larger force. The defenders, again, put up a stubborn defense but eventually were overwhelmed.

After the defenders defeated the Japanese on 11 December, the Navy's senior leaders were forced to decide on the fate of the men on Wake Island. In the final analysis it was determined that the strategic loss of any of three aircraft carriers operating in the Pacific outweighed the tactical gain of relieving the beleaguered island.

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