

K9W — Remembering “The Forgotten 98”

A DXpedition to Wake Atoll in memory of the 98 civilian construction workers who died there during World War II.

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and Lou Dietrich, N2TU**

The 2013 K9W DXpedition to Wake Atoll was unique in that its purpose wasn't just to put a rare one on the air, but to commemorate an important event in history, an event that took place in a part of the United States that most Americans will never see: Wake Island — one of the most beautiful and isolated coral atolls in the world.

Over the last 30 years, there has been limited Amateur Radio activity from Wake Island. The last DXpedition was in 1998. Since then, activity from this rare DXCC entity has been intermittent, mostly from military personnel on temporary assignment. In October 2012, the Club Log Most Wanted List ranked Wake Island as #14 and *DX Magazine* had it at #21.

Wake Atoll Overview

Wake is a wishbone-shaped atoll, consisting of three islands (Peale, Wake, and Wilkes) surrounded by a coral reef enclosing a central lagoon. It's situated in the northern Pacific Ocean about 2300 miles west of Hawaii (see Figure 1). Wake occupies an area of 2.8 square miles. Its surface consists of disintegrated coral with boulders, trees, and shrubs. The beautiful beaches are a combination of white coral sand and jagged coral rocks.

There is a 9800-foot-long runway but no ports, although two offshore anchorages exist for large ships. The atoll lies 19° north of the equator with a tropical climate similar to Hawaii. Because Wake is located west of the International Date Line, it is 1 day ahead of US continental time. Because of defense-related activity there, Wake is a highly restricted airbase overseen by the United States Air Force (USAF).

The Role of Wake in World War II

Wake was first settled in 1935 by Pan Am Airways to service transpacific

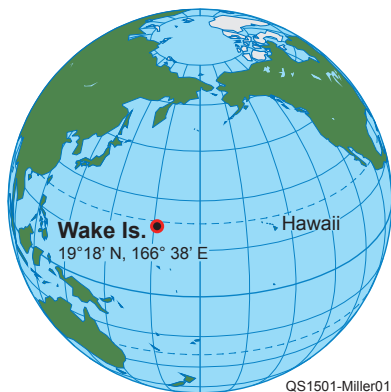


Figure 1 — Location of Wake Island.

“China Clipper” flights between San Francisco and Hong Kong.

As the storm clouds of World War II gathered in late 1940, the US Navy began construction of a military base and airfield. On August 19, 1941, the first garrison landed. Less than 4 months later, on December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and Wake Island simultaneously. The small garrison held their position. On December

23, Wake Island succumbed to further Japanese attacks and remained occupied until the end of the war.

All US military and civilians were sent to POW camps in Asia, except for 98 civilian contractors, who became known as “The Forgotten 98.” For almost 2 years as POWs, the 98 civilians constructed barricades, bunkers, tunnels, ditches, and runways. Unfortunately, all 98 contractors lost their lives on October 7, 1943.¹ The famous “POW Rock” (see Figure 2), a 4-foot-high piece of coral that sits at the edge of the lagoon, features an inscription carved by one of the 98. This unknown POW escaped the camp long enough to carve “98 US P.W. 5-10-43” into the rock before being captured once again.

With the end of the war, Wake Island returned to US control. In 1966, a Marine Memorial was erected to honor those lost in that December 1941 “Battle of Wake Island” (see Figure 3). Wake was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1985.

Getting Approval

The idea for this DXpedition began when Team Leader Lou Dietrich, N2TU, saw a Wake Island documentary on the History Channel that summarized the fate of The Forgotten 98. Lou's goal was to use the DXpedition to commemorate the sacrifices of these men on the 70th anniversary of their death, October 7, 2013.

Lou then began a lengthy process seeking permission to conduct a DXpedition on Wake Atoll. Initial correspondence with the USAF, the Department of the Interior, and Department of Insular Affairs in October 2012 was less than encouraging. Undaunted, Lou continued to seek permission to travel to Wake, which required securing USAF signatures at several levels in the



Figure 2 — Lou, N2TU (left), and John, K6MM, visit POW Rock, where one of the 98 who escaped the Japanese chiseled the inscription “98 US P.W. 5-10-43” before being recaptured.

¹Notes appear at the end of the article.



Figure 3 — The Marine Memorial erected in 1966 in honor of those lost in the Battle of Wake Island.

Pentagon, including General Hawk Carlisle (Commander, Pacific Air Forces).

The purpose and scope of the trip had to be clearly defined; medical forms approved, background checks completed, and an approved budget finalized. Finally on October 28, 2013, we received our travel orders. Although the team missed the October 7 anniversary, we were nevertheless excited about implementing this commemorative DXpedition.

The team selected for the DXpedition consisted of Joe, AA4NN; John, K6MM; Craig, K9CT; Mike, K9NW; Ralph, K9ZO; Lou, N2TU; Jim, N9TK; Mark, NA6M; Dick, W3OA; Joe, W8GEX; Hal, W8HC, and Jerry, WB9Z. In addition, an off-island support team was assembled to handle logistics, fund raising, equipment testing, propagation plans, and pilot communications.

On March 1, 2013, the first press release was issued announcing the DXpedition and

dedicating it to The Forgotten 98. Financial support began arriving from major clubs, foundations, and individuals. Elecraft and SteppIR provided transceivers, amplifiers, and antennas, all of which were thoroughly pretested before shipment. Equipment was shipped to Kimo, KH7U, in Hawaii and stored at his home until it could be transported to our departure point, Hickam Air Force Base (AFB).

Who Were The Forgotten 98?

In February 2013, the K9W DXpedition website was launched.² Since the DXpedition's main purpose was to honor the memory of The Forgotten 98 civilian contractors, information about the 98 was included on the website.

Ranging in age from 18 to 50, most were highly skilled workers representing all the trades: carpenters, masons, electricians, plumbers, pipefitters, heavy equipment operators, welders, mechanics, etc. Living in the Depression Era, they sought better paying jobs. Unfortunately, history would show that they were truly in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Shipping Out

The K9W team assembled for the first time in Hawaii on October 31. After dinner, the team prepared for the shuttle bus trip to Hickam at 1 AM. Hickam is a restricted airfield immediately adjacent to Honolulu International Airport. While waiting to depart, Lou conducted his first team meeting, where we discussed our primary DXpedition goals.

We departed Hickam AFB at 4 AM on a charter flight and landed on Wake Atoll 5 hours later. Our hosts, Don Davis and Colin Bradley, met us on arrival. They are both civilian employees of Chugach Alaska Corporation. Colin, licensed as WA2YUN, became a good friend and a valuable resource. Our other host was Captain Charlie Taylor, the on-site commander for the USAF — also a strong supporter of our efforts on Wake Atoll.

Sites and Setups

After checking in, we headed back to the airfield to gather our equipment pallets, which had been previously shipped to Wake by Kimo, KH7U. Everything had arrived safely and after loading the truck, we were on our way to set up the stations. The USAF offered us two locations: an abandoned chapel near the airfield that



Figure 4 — This abandoned chapel near the ocean became the location for the two CW stations.

was 500 feet from the Pacific Ocean, and “the Shack” — a small beach house on the lagoon side of the island. The chapel was assigned to the CW team (see Figure 4) and the lagoon Shack to the SSB/RTTY team.

Inside the chapel, the CW team set up two stations using Elecraft K3 transceivers and KPA500 amplifiers together with laptops. K3-KPA500 gear was chosen because they are lightweight, easy to ship, and together offer a great ergonomic solution (ie, low fatigue factor, controls within easy reach). Colin had arranged for 220 V supply for the Expert Amplifier 2K-FA 1500 W linear, which was used exclusively on 160 meters.

Two SteppIR BigIR verticals were set up, one with the 80 meter coil. The team also erected a 50-foot Battle Creek Special vertical, which was used primarily for 160 meter CW. Largely because of pretesting and preplanning, the set up went very smoothly. Just 12 hours after our arrival, Craig, K9CT, made the first contact with JA1ADN on 30 meter CW.

Meanwhile, the SSB/RTTY team was setting up in the Shack. This open-air structure overlooking the beautiful lagoon was large enough for three K3-KPA500 stations (see Figure 5). SSB#1 and SSB#2 used a second pair of BigIR verticals. SSB#3 used either a TransWorld vertical dipole placed near the lagoon or an eight-element 6 meter Yagi on a hand-rotatable 20-foot mast.

The BigIR with the 80 meter coil was located next to the lagoon and several radials were actually slipped into the water. The



Figure 5 — The spacious, open-air Shack was home to the three SSB/RTTY stations, being manned by (from left) Lou, N2TU; Dick, W3OA, and Hal, W8HC.

second BigIR vertical was located on the other side of the Shack in a clearing.

BigIR verticals were used at both locations because these 33-foot vertical antennas are easy to assemble and guy, are tunable to an SWR of 1:1 on each band, and provide outstanding performance, especially near salt water. They worked flawlessly at both sites.

Tribute to the 98

On November 10, the K9W DXpedition conducted an on-air tribute to the Forgotten 98. Because the 98 were employed by Morrison-Knudsen from Boise, Idaho, a 15 meter schedule was arranged with Boise operator Don Clower, KA7T. Local television station KBOI taped the event in Don's shack and a few relatives of the 98 listened in, as K9W team leader Lou, N2TU, read a eulogy and the names of all The Forgotten 98 contractors over the air [Go to www.kboi2.com and search "Wake Island" to see the video. — *Ed.*]. The next day, November 11, 2013 — Veteran's Day — our team attended the flag raising ceremony along with Air Force personnel and local Thai workers.

One Last Push

Our last full day of operation was November 14. The next morning the CW and SSB teams broke down the stations and carefully packed the equipment for the return flight to Honolulu. While the guys were starting to relax, John, K6MM, waited patiently for the last upload to Club Log. Our total number of contacts was 99,865. John smiled as he wrote down the number and headed back toward the Shack. Walking toward him were Jerry, WB9Z; Joe, W8GEX, and Hal, W8HC. John held up the scribbled number and in almost total silence the group immediately turned around

and went back to the Shack.

They unpacked the TransWorld vertical dipole, a spare Icom IC-706 transceiver and power supply. Running just 100 W, Hal, W8HC, called CQ on 10 meter SSB while John, K6MM, paper-logged 92 contacts. After dinner, Jerry, WB9Z, and Mark, NA6M, took the IC-706 to Colin Bradley's shack. Using his Yagi, they paper-logged another 74 contacts on 20. The final contact count for the K9W DXpedition: 100,031. Amazingly we later discovered that 48 of those 166 contacts were "first timers."

On November 16, 2013, the team boarded their return flight to Honolulu, carrying with them the memories of a lifetime. The team was grateful for the opportunity to put a rare DXCC entity on the air and for the privilege to highlight a special piece of history.

Acknowledgments

We'd like to thank the US Air Force and the Pentagon for giving us permission to put Wake Atoll on the air and also our gracious hosts while on the island: Don Taylor, Colin Bradley, Captain Charlie Taylor, and Dr Scott Kennedy.

Critical to our success was our strong off-island support team of Hiroo, JA1WSX; Kevin, K6TD; Stu, K6TU; Stan, KH6CG; Kimo, KH7U; Col, MMØNDX; Don, N1DG; Tom, ND2T; Valerie, NV9L; Janet, W8CAA, and Margaret Blackwell.

This DXpedition would not have been possible without the strong financial support of many worldwide clubs, foundations (especially NCDXF and INDEXA), and individual donors, as well as our equipment sponsors, especially Elecraft and SteppIR.

Finally, a special thanks to Bonnie Gilbert, author and historian, who provided much valuable advice in her personal quest to bring closure to the families of The Forgotten 98 by working with the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command.⁵

Notes

¹<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/wq.html>

²K9W website, wake2013.org.

³A Report: To Returned CPNAB POW Heroes and Their Dependents;" 1945; The Pacific Island Employees Foundation, Inc.; Boise, ID.

⁴Additional Post-DXpedition stats are on Club Log: secure.clublog.org/charts/?c=k9w#r.

⁵B. Gilbert, "Building for War" at bonitagilbert.com.

All photos courtesy of the authors.

John Miller, K6MM, an ARRL® member, was first licensed as WV2BQJ in 1958. In 1976, John's career took him to Silicon Valley, where he reconnected with Amateur Radio in the late '90s. For the past decade, John has focused heavily on DXing, contesting, and recruiting new operators into the hobby. He was a member of the 2010 PJ7E Sint Maarten DXpedition. His DXCC total stands at 330 confirmed. John can be reached at 6349 Slida Dr, San Jose, CA 95129-3948, k6mm@arri.net.

Lou Dietrich, N2TU, an ARRL member, was originally licensed as WV2RNW in the early '60s during his high school years. He upgraded to WA2RNW, but allowed that call to lapse. He got back on the air as KA2MBC in 1981, upgraded to Amateur Extra class as NN2G, and finally obtained the vanity call N2TU. Lou is an avid DXer who is currently listed on the DXCC Honor Roll and Ten Band DXCC. He was a member of the 2012 Swains Island DXpedition and the Team Leader for the K9W Wake 2013 Commemorative DXpedition. He can be reached at 200 Broadbill Dr, Mooresville, NC 28117-9196, n2tu@arri.net.

