

THE FIRST MARINE DEFENSE BATTALION AT PEARL HARBOR

By Alfred F. Kugel

BACKGROUND

In the 1930s American was trying to cope with the problems associated with the stock market crash and the Great Depression in the economy and was relatively unconcerned with military matters across the oceans. However, this started to change following the so-called Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937, which blossomed into full-scale warfare between Japan and China. As a result, the Marine Corps began discussing the establishment of battalion-sized security detachments on key Pacific outposts. However, there was very little government money allocated to the military in those days, so any build-up of assets for the defense of these territories would be painfully slow. Unlike the normal Marine mobile forces, which were created to carry out offensive operations from the sea, the concept was that defense battalions would remain at the stations that they defended.

THE FIRST MARINES

This view resulted in the formation of the First Marine Defense Battalion in November 1939 in response to our presumed weakness in the Pacific. Initially stationed at San Diego, the approximately 1,000 officers and men were not deployed to Pearl Harbor until February 1941. To bolster the defenses on some of the other islands, it was decided that a portion of the men should be sent farther west. Since construction activity at the naval air base on Wake Island was nearing completion, it was considered necessary that a garrison be assigned there, and some 400 men moved there in August to work on building such facilities as command posts, gun emplacements, ammunition dumps and aid stations. Smaller groups were transferred to Johnston and Palmyra Islands in the Central Pacific.

By the end of November 1941 then, the Battalion had been divided up into four groups, deployed as follows: 261 men at Pearl Harbor, 422 on Wake, 162 on Johnston and 158 on Palmyra. The parent group in Hawaii was housed in several 100-man temporary wooden barracks at Pearl Harbor that had been built in 1940 and 1941.

RESPONSE TO THE ATTACK

The attack on Honolulu commenced early in the morning of December 7, 1941 – see Figure 1 for a picture of the assault as commemorated on a Japanese military post card. In response, the early risers among the Marines ran for the armories and gun sheds, issuing rifles and ammunition to all comers. Bugle calls alerted the rest of the detachment, which was commanded by Lt. Colonel Bert Bone, and men started to assemble machine guns, fill ammunition belts and break out firefighting equipment. Machine gun fire was directed at Japanese aircraft participating in the second wave of attacks, while trucks were dispatched to the nearest ammunition dump at Fort Kamehameha and the Naval Ammunition Depot at Lualualei to obtain additional supplies.

In the end, the Marines responded as best they could although the heaviest damage had already been inflicted on our warships by the time the resistance could be organized. However, one of the barracks buildings was emptied to be ready to receive casualties. In addition, parties of Marines reported to the waterfront to assist in moving wounded from the ships in the harbor to the Navy Hospital.



Figure 1. The attack on Pearl Harbor as depicted on a Japanese military postcard.

LATER ACTION

In the American victory at the battle of Midway, which came just six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, all four participating Japanese main battle carriers were sunk as compared to only one of ours (U.S.S. *Yorktown*), with the loss of all their planes and pilots while most of *Yorktown's* aircraft were able to land safely on *Enterprise* or *Hornet*. As a result, the tide of the war in the Pacific turned and Japan was forced onto the defensive. This meant that the invasion threat to Hawaii had lifted and the defensive units stationed there could be redeployed elsewhere. For the First Marines, this allowed them to participate in the subsequent American invasions of Tarawa, Guam and Okinawa before being disbanded in 1947.

PHILATELIC ASPECTS

Considering the small size of the contingent, finding covers sent by the First Marines is not all that easy. The early envelopes look like civilian mail with normal stamps affixed and postmarks of the regular post offices in Honolulu. Thus, they do not call attention to what they are. One needs to look for return addresses with some form of “First Defense Battalion, Pearl Harbor.” In the later stages of the operations, however, a special postmark inscribed “First Defense Battalion/Marine Fleet Force” came into use. I have not seen a reference to when it was put into service, but the earliest example that I have noted is dated October 1, 1941.

As to inbound mail sent to the Marines, it was sorted at Pearl Harbor, with the mail clerks separating out that addressed to men who had been assigned to the outer islands. These letters were then given a forwarding marking indicating their new location and pouched for transmission westward at the next opportunity. Figure 3 shows a cover addressed to a Marine on Wake Island in early 1942. However, Sgt. Bowsher had already been taken prisoner by the Japanese by that time, so it was returned to the sender as undeliverable.



Figure 2. Cover forwarded to a Marine on Midway in June 1941.

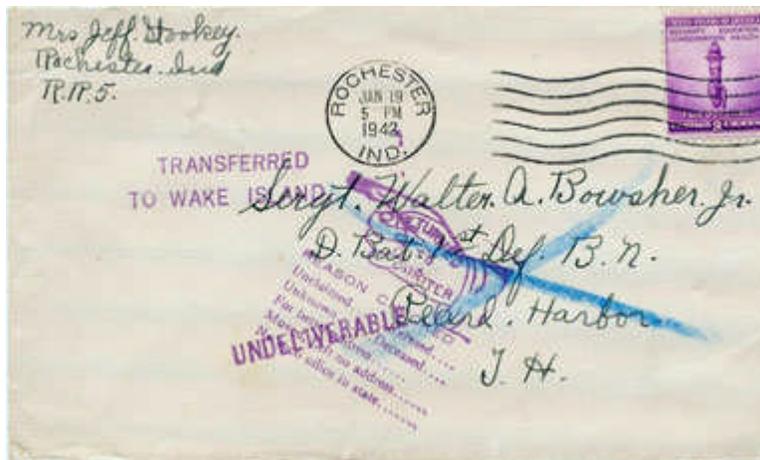


Figure 3. Cover that couldn't be forwarded to a Marine on Wake in early 1942, so returned.

Of special interest, of course, is the cancel dated December 7, 1941 used on the cover depicted as Figure 4, which was mailed from Hawaii to the mainland on the first day that we were at war. Interestingly, censorship was organized immediately after the hostilities commenced as indicated by the censor marking applied to the lower left corner of the envelope. Obviously, the mail clerk was able to perform his normal functions that day, presumably after the attack had ended, thus creating a great souvenir of the event.



Figure 4. Cover from the First Defense Battalion mailed on December 7, 1941.

REFERENCES:

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marine_defense_battalions

Condition Red: Marine Defense Battalions in World War II by Major Charles D. Melson.