

From Wake to Korea

For the better part of that dark, sinister month of December 1941, US Marines held tenaciously to Wake, a small atoll of three connected islands in the Central Pacific Ocean. Just five hours after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, enemy airplanes bombed and strafed Wake's hotel and the Pan American docks that served the airline's famous Clipper flying boat service to the Orient. On December 11, Captain McCoy Platt, Clemson College Class of 1935, and the outnumbered Marines of Wake's defense battalion repelled the first Japanese attempt to land on the island. The gallant stand of Wake's defenders captured the public's attention. Newspaper headlines trumpeted the Marines' "glorious fight." On a national radio program, band leader Kay Kyser dedicated a song to Wake's defenders. When told by his commanding officer of Kyser's gesture, Platt replied, "What did they play, 'Taps'?"



Wesley McCoy Platt of Summerville was a chemistry major and a member of Athanon, the campus chemistry club. He served in the Central Dance Association and was selected for membership in Blue Key honor society. He served as a captain in the Cadet Corps and was a member of the military honor society Scabbard and Blade. Platt was captain of the ROTC boxing team and in the summer of 1934 attended ROTC training at Fort McClellan, Alabama.

After graduation, Platt was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps. In 1938, he served with the 2nd Marine Brigade in China. His next assignment was at Pearl Harbor in the Hawaii Territory. In August 1941, as tensions escalated in the Pacific, Platt was ordered to Wake Island. As second in command of Wake's forces, Platt was in charge of the defensive strong point on Wilkes Island, one of the atoll's islets. Platt was youthful in appearance, athletic, and had a "wisecracking manner," writes author Bill Sloan in *Given Up for Dead: America's Heroic Stand at Wake Island*. "Virtually every Marine who knew him sang his praises." Captain Platt was a "good man and the very epitome of an officer and a gentleman," remembered one Wake defender who served with him.

The Marines withstood the initial Japanese attacks and repelled the first attempt to land troops on the atoll, but following twelve days of bombardment, the Japanese came again on December 23. Moving among his defensive positions and coordinating the actions of his men, Platt and his seventy Marines set one Japanese transport on fire and trapped the Japanese soldiers on Wilkes beach, defeating them once again. The story on Wake Island's beach was different. There, the US Navy commander of the atoll surrendered to overwhelming Japanese forces—ending the battle for Platt and his Wilkes defenders as well. A distraught Platt surrendered only upon the direct order of his commanding officer. For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action against the Japanese, Captain Platt was awarded the Silver Star.

President Roosevelt praised the Marines' valor and proclaimed that their fight "will not be forgotten so long as gallantry and heroism are respected and honored." But the fight for Platt and the other surviving Marines was about to enter a new phase—they became Japanese prisoners of war. Loaded onto a Japanese ship, the *Nitta Maru*, the prisoners were brutalized by their captors. Five of the prisoners were hauled on deck and beheaded as revenge for having killed Japanese soldiers. Platt was severely beaten for violating a rule forbidding the prisoners from speaking. Fellow prisoner Lieutenant John Kinney later wrote that Platt "set an excellent example of resistance for the rest of us to follow during our period of captivity."

Platt and the other Wake prisoners were transported from Japan to a prisoner of war camp at Shanghai, China. In a rare letter sent from the camp, Platt complained to his father that it was "a complete nuisance" being confined to a prisoners' compound "when there is so much going on." Somehow, even in captivity, Platt retained his sense of humor, writing, "I wouldn't have been caught but I was a little hesitant about trying to swim 1300 miles." Platt was eventually moved to Manchuria and Korea and finally back to Japan where he was held until Japan's surrender in August 1945. Platt was one of World War II's longest-serving American prisoners of war.



Captain Platt returned to the United States in September and was stationed at Charleston. His next assignment to Quantico, Virginia brought with it additional duties—and benefits—when in August 1946 he married Jane Aery Price, the widow of an Army officer who had been killed in Europe. Platt adopted Jane's son, a polio victim. Over many months, Platt personally provided physical therapy to the boy who was eventually able to walk.

Now a lieutenant colonel, Platt commanded the Marines at Kaneohe Air Station, Hawaii from the fall of 1946 until July 1947. In that same year, Jane gave birth to a daughter. In 1948, Platt was assigned to Marine Corps Headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. He was promoted to colonel in January 1951 and four months later was ordered to Korea as an officer on the staff of the 1st Marine Division.

The war in Korea had been a see-saw affair. Initial North Korean successes in June 1950 had been countered by the landings of United Nations forces at Inchon in September. Seoul, the South Korean capital, had been liberated and UN troops had pushed north to the vicinity of the Chinese border. Chinese forces had then entered the war forcing a UN retreat. By the summer of 1951, Platt's 1st Marine Division had settled into defensive positions at the Punchbowl, a terrain feature in east-central Korea.

On September 27, 1951, Colonel Platt was mortally wounded when the jeep in which he was crossing a bridge was hit by enemy artillery. Platt received multiple shrapnel wounds and died the following day. He was the highest-ranking Marine to be killed in action in Korea.

Colonel Platt's body was returned to the United States and buried in Arlington National Cemetery. He was survived by his wife and children. He was awarded the Legion of Merit for "exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services to the Government of the United States in Korea." Colonel Platt was honored in other ways as well. The parade ground at Marine Corps Air Station Kaneohe, Hawaii is Platt Field. A bridge in Korea bears his name as does the Veterans Service Center in Charleston, West Virginia.



See also the [profile](#) on Colonel Platt by Robert Louis Daniell; and *Given Up for Dead: America's Heroic Stand at Wake Island* by Bill Sloan, Bantam Books, 2008.

Thanks to John Payne for research assistance.