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The Marine Corps Turns 250! The Heroic Battle at Wake Island

The United States Marine Corps turns 250 years old this month. On November 10, 1775, the Second Continental Congress commissioned Samuel Nicholas as the first Marine Corps commissioned officer. That very evening, Nicholas went to Tun Tavern in Philadelphia. He spoke with men of diverse ages and occupations and began recruiting them to fight for American independence in the newly formed Marine Corps.

Since the Revolutionary War, Marines have fought in nearly every major U.S. conflict, often as the first forces on the ground. Those who serve embody the Marine values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment.

It was those hallmark values that led one group of Marines to display unimaginable valor during the Battle of Wake Island in the opening days of World War II. Major James Patrick Sinnott Devereux arrived on Wake Island in October 1941 to command nearly 400 Marines of the First Defense Battalion. This Marine detachment

was supplemented by Marine Corps Fighter Squadron VMF-211, 69 Navy personnel,

Major Devereux

and more than 1,000 civilian contractors.

Devereux ruled with an iron fist, directing his men and civilian construction workers to build defensive emplacements around the island. They worked seven days a week, transforming the defenses of the tiny island outpost. He was disciplined and demanding, and this discipline would later serve his men well.

Less than two months after Devereux's arrival, on Monday morning, December 8, 1941 (December 7 in Hawaii), Devereux received an uncoded message Pearl Harbor was under attack. Soon, a bugler sounded the call to arms on Wake Island. Amid rain squalls, the Marines quickly manned their battle stations.

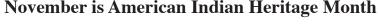
It took about five hours for Japanese bombers to reach Wake Island, but just before noon, 27 bombers broke through the clouds and began dropping bombs. When the attack ended, gasoline storage tanks exploded into searing flames, seven aircraft were destroyed, and 34 men were dead or wounded. This first attack was not the last, and over the next 15 days, Marines, Navy sailors, and volunteer civilian contractors worked heroically to hold the island.

On December 11, Japan, confident that it would be able to take Wake Island easily, dispatched a task force comprising six destroyers, three light cruisers, two transports, two patrol boats, and two submarines. The flotilla approached Wake Island and began to launch shells. Major Devereux ordered Marines to hold their return fire. Anxiously, they waited for the Japanese vessels to come within range of their 5-inch guns. As the ships moved closer, the Marines unleashed their fire. The Japanese lost two ships and a submarine, with several other vessels sustaining damage.

This stunning victory at Wake Island bolstered the nation's fighting spirit, still reeling after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Over the next two weeks, American combatants on Wake Island fought valiantly. They were, however, outnumbered and outgunned. On December 23, 1941, the Japanese launched a second amphibious assault, and Devereux was forced to order a cease-fire. He had to give the order three times before his weary Marines would quit. The surrendered Americans were taken prisoner of war and transported to various camps. Some civilian workers were kept on Wake Island, where they performed forced labor for the Japanese before being executed on October 7, 1943.

Major Devereaux and many of his Marines ended up at Hakodate prison camp #3 in Utashunai, Japan. Devereaux served as the commanding officer of the prison camp, maintaining order among the prisoners. He and the other prisoners spent nearly four years working as slave labor at a nearby coal mine. During his time as a POW, unbeknownst to Major Devereaux, his wife, Mary, died of complications of diabetes at age 27.

Following Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, Army and Navy planes began dropping food and clothing to the prisoners at the Hokodate camp. Liberators eventually reached the camp in September. Devereux refused evacuation, insisting that the injured and sick prisoners be rescued first. He was the last man to leave. The news that the heroic Marines who defended Wake Island were alive made national headlines.



Celebrating the history and heritage of North Carolina's Indigenous people

In honor of our nation's first inhabitants, Governor Josh Stein proclaimed November as American Indian Heritage Month, celebrating the history and heritage of North Carolina's eight state recognized tribes including the Coharie, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Haliwa-Saponi, Lumbee, Meherrin, Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, Sappony and Waccamaw-Siouan. This month also honors our state's four urban Indian organizations consisting of the Cumberland County Association for Indian People, and the Guilford, Metrolina, and Triangle Native American Associations.

"It is my honor to sign a proclamation declaring November American Indian Heritage Month," said Governor Josh Stein. "American Indians have lived in North Carolina since long before there was a North Carolina. Throughout their history, they have preserved their culture and traditions from generation to generation. I am proud to recognize their positive impact on North Carolina."

According to the 2020 U.S. Census Bureau, more than 130,000 American Indians call North Carolina home, making it the second largest American Indian population east of the Mississippi River and the seventh largest American Indian population in the nation.

"American Indian history is deeply woven into the fabric of North Carolina-Manteo to Murphy, through our waterways, streets, and towns," said NC Department of Administration Secretary Gabriel J. Esparza. "This month, we honor not only the rich heritage of our state's first inhabitants but also recognize the vibrant presence and ongoing contributions of American Indian communities living, working, and shaping life in North Carolina today.'

For more than 50 years, the NC Department of Administration's Commission of Indian Affairs has served as a hub for tribal resources, providing services related to housing, educational opportunities, scholarships, health care, and workforce development to American Indian communities. Established by the NC General Assembly in 1971, the Commission remains committed to providing local, state and federal resources to support and advocate for the North Carolinas American Indian population.

In celebration of American Indian Heritage Month, the NC Commission of Indian Affairs is partnering with the NC Museum of History, NC Museum of Art, NC American Indian Heritage Commission, as well as North Carolina American Indian tribes and urban Indian organizations to coordinate a weekend of special events. The 30th Annual American Indian Heritage Celebration will kick off with a virtual Education Day on November 21 at 9 a.m. featuring storytelling and dance performances among other activities. The November 22 celebration will be held in-person at the North Carolina Museum of Art at 11 a.m. and will include various demonstrations and performances highlighting the artistry, customs and culture of North Carolina's American Indian tribes. Both events are free and open to the public.

To learn more about the upcoming American Indian Heritage Month Celebration visit the North Carolina Museum of History website, ncmuseumofhistory.org.

Scholarship Opportunity for North Carolina Students!

NC students from households making \$80,000 or less could have their tuition and fees fully covered thanks to the Next NC Scholarship! The scholarship is for community colleges and public universities in North Carolina. This is money that doesn't have to be repaid!

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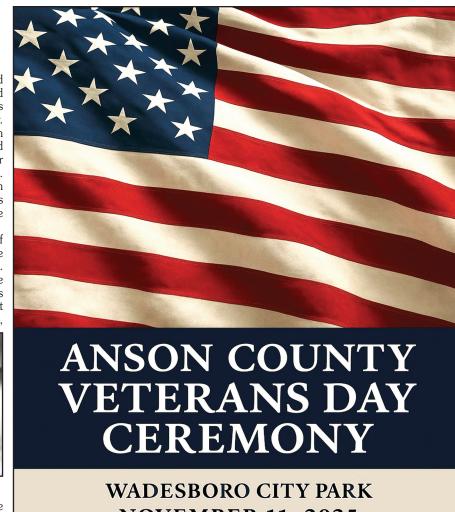
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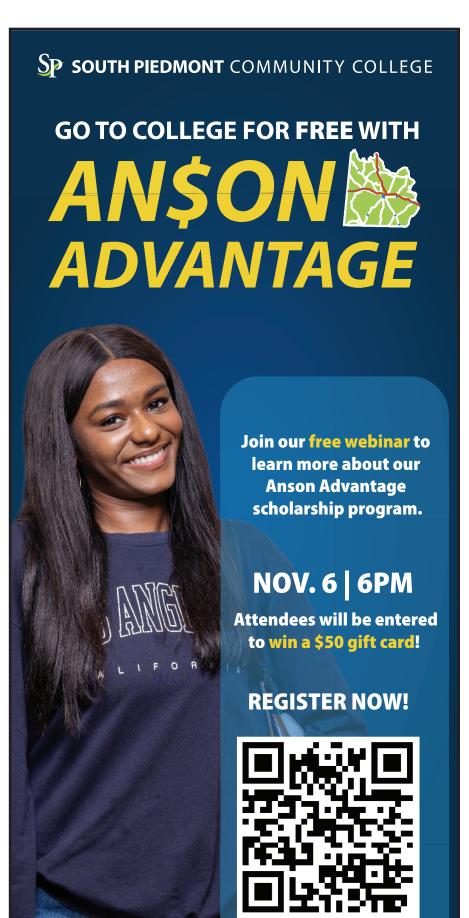
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