



NEWS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Office of the Secretary
For Immediate Release: June 5, 2002

Contact: Hugh Vickery
202-501-4633

Veterans Commemorate 60th Anniversary of Historic Battle at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge

More than 150 people gathered today on remote Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the battle that turned the tide of World War II in the Pacific.

Six veterans of the Battle of Midway were among the two dozen World War II veterans who attended the solemn wreath-laying ceremony in honor of those Americans who fought in the decisive naval victory.

"In the face of impending defeat, ordinary men from ordinary communities did the extraordinary, and they did it with courage, integrity, selflessness and perseverance," said Craig Manson, assistant secretary of Interior for fish and wildlife and parks. Manson is an Air Force Academy graduate and Air Force officer who now serves as a colonel in the Air National Guard.

"We will not forget you and we will never fail to honor your sacrifice," Manson said. "This atoll is dedicated to you in perpetuity by a grateful nation."

Manson was joined at the ceremony by Assistant Secretary of the Navy, H.T. Johnson, Rear Admiral Anthony L. Winns, other senior military officers, representatives of veterans organizations, veterans and their families, and officials from the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which operates the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge.

"We are all here because we care deeply about honoring our veterans," said Anne Badgley, regional director of the Service's Pacific Region. "Our recognition of their sacrifices stems from a heart-felt desire to show our veterans our appreciation for their courage, valor and commitment to protecting the freedoms we still enjoy today."

Wreaths were laid on the monument honoring those who fought and those who died on Midway, as a U.S. Navy musician played taps and U.S. Navy guns fired a salute.

"It is very nice to see the attention given by the Fish and Wildlife Service to the memorial and the history and the artifacts here," said retired U.S. Navy Vice Admiral William D. Houser, a veteran of the Midway battle. "There's a real opportunity here to do both missions: wildlife protection and historic preservation."

For more than 90 years, the U.S. Navy had jurisdiction over Midway. Located 1,200 miles northwest of Hawaii, the atoll has served as a vital link in communications, transportation and military history. It is best known for the Battle of Midway, fought June 4-6, 1942, which is recognized as the turning point of the war in the Pacific.

The Navy closed the Naval Air Facility on Midway in the early 1990s and turned the atoll over to the

Department of the Interior in 1996 to be managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service as a national wildlife refuge.

More than a million Laysan albatross birds live on the refuge, along with 14 other species of sea birds. The atoll also is home to endangered monk seals, threatened green sea turtles and many other species.

In 2000, the Interior Department designated the atoll as the Battle of Midway National Memorial, as authorized by Congress. An advisory group composed of veterans and other interested parties will make recommendations on how the Memorial should be managed.

Public access to Midway was temporarily suspended in January when the tour operator unexpectedly announced it was ceasing operations, resulting in the closure of the airport and visitor facilities. A short-term contractor is now in place on Midway, maintaining the atoll's basic infrastructure.

The atoll's airport reopened June 1 under a contract with American Airport Corporation of San Diego, Calif. Visitor facilities remain closed while the Fish and Wildlife Service seeks a new tour operator.

Manson emphasized the agency's commitment to reopening the refuge to visitors.

"It is important that people be able to visit Midway to enjoy its rich wildlife and other natural treasures, and to reflect on what happened here," he said. "The Department of the Interior will ensure that those who fought and died here are always remembered."

- DOI -