

House Concurrent Resolution 23

Sponsored by Representatives LEWIS, HELFRICH; Representatives DIEHL, EVANS, SKARLATOS

SUMMARY

The following summary is not prepared by the sponsors of the measure and is not a part of the body thereof subject to consideration by the Legislative Assembly. It is an editor's brief statement of the essential features of the measure **as introduced**. The statement includes a measure digest written in compliance with applicable readability standards.

Digest: Honors certain Oregonians who were not members of the armed forces for their World War II service. (Flesch Readability Score: 60.1).

Recognizes and honors Oregon civilians who served the United States on Wake Island during World War II.

Commends individuals who have increased public awareness of the service and sacrifice of these civilians.

CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

1
2 Whereas the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, which propelled
3 the United States into World War II, was followed five hours later and 2,000 miles to the west by
4 an attack on Wake Island; and

5 Whereas on Wake Island, civilian contractors were building a vital United States Navy (USN)
6 base and refueling facility that the Japanese also needed in order to expand their operations in the
7 Pacific Theater; and

8 Whereas Morrison-Knudsen Company, a member of the Contractors Pacific Naval Air Bases
9 consortium, was employing more than 1,100 American civilians who were skilled in heavy con-
10 struction to build the naval base on Wake Island, including 134 civilians with Oregon connections;
11 and

12 Whereas many of the civilian contractors on Wake Island abandoned their tools and heavy
13 construction equipment to aid the United States Marine Corps detachment during the 16-day siege
14 and final battle against Japanese forces, during which 49 U.S. military personnel and 34 civilians
15 were killed, including two Oregonians; and

16 Whereas a USN task force was dispatched from Pearl Harbor to rescue and reinforce the em-
17 battled civilian and military personnel on Wake Island, but it was ordered to abort shortly after
18 Japanese forces landed on the island, leaving the Americans on their own and without hope of res-
19 cue; and

20 Whereas Japanese forces eventually captured Wake Island and took all surviving Americans as
21 prisoners of war (POWs), transporting more than 1,000 civilian and military POWs to Japan and
22 China, and forcing 98 POWs to remain on Wake Island and perform construction work for Japan,
23 now the enemy of the United States; and

24 Whereas 11 Oregonians were among the 98 civilian contractor POWs who were brutally exe-
25 cuted on Wake Island by the Japanese on October 7, 1943, nearly two years after their capture and
26 forced labor; and

27 Whereas 18 Oregon civilian contractors died as slave prisoners of war in Japanese POW camps
28 in China and Japan during the remaining years of the war; and

NOTE: Matter in **boldfaced** type in an amended section is new; matter *[italic and bracketed]* is existing law to be omitted. New sections are in **boldfaced** type.

1 Whereas the Japanese forces on Wake Island surrendered to U.S. forces on September 4, 1945;
2 and

3 Whereas in 1981 the United States Department of Defense recognized the civilians who con-
4 tributed to the defense of Wake Island during World War II as eligible for military discharge, medals
5 and veterans' benefits; and

6 Whereas 17 Oregon civilians were laid to rest in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific
7 ("Punchbowl") in Hawaii, and 73 were laid to rest in Oregon or their ashes were scattered at sea;
8 and

9 Whereas 103 Oregonians who worked as Wake Island civilian contractors survived World War
10 II, but all have since passed away; and

11 Whereas Bonita Gilbert, daughter of Wake Island civilian POW and survivor Theodore B. Olson
12 of Portland, Oregon, is a graduate of the University of Oregon with B.A. and M.A. degrees in history
13 and the author of *Building for War: The Epic Saga of the Civilian Contractors and Marines of Wake*
14 *Island in World War II*; and

15 Whereas Bonita Gilbert has visited Wake Island and interviewed Wake Island survivors and
16 families, and she is an authority on the history of Wake Island in World War II; and

17 Whereas although the World War II Memorial on the State Capitol grounds in Salem honors
18 Oregon's nearly 4,000 veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice during the war, it does not honor
19 Oregon's 31 civilians who made the same sacrifice during combat or as POWs while also serving our
20 nation; and

21 Whereas the "nonbattle losses" plaque at the World War II Memorial does not adequately de-
22 scribe the combat role Oregon's civilians played during the Japanese capture of Wake Island and
23 their deaths at the hands of the enemy during the battle, from executions on Wake Island or in
24 Japanese POW camps; and

25 Whereas the state Department of Veterans' Affairs has proposed in House Bill 2344 (2025) to
26 add more names of service members to the World War II Memorial and has proposed new criteria
27 for adding names, criteria that include the same causes of death as those experienced by the Wake
28 Island civilian contractors; and

29 Whereas House Bill 2344 does not propose adding the names of any civilians, including the 31
30 Wake Island civilian contractors who perished under the same conditions as service members; and

31 Whereas the names of Oregon's civilians who perished during World War II should be included
32 in the "educational tool" of the Department of Veterans' Affairs that is proposed in House Bill 2344;
33 and

34 Whereas Oregon's 31 World War II civilians who perished under combat and POW conditions
35 have few individuals left to honor them and no organization available to pursue their recognition,
36 and they are not honored elsewhere in Oregon, even nearly 80 years after World War II ended; and

37 Whereas in 2017, the Oregon State Capitol Foundation dedicated a memorial near the World
38 War II Memorial to the late and highly decorated Claire Maybelle Phillips, a civilian spy and
39 humanitarian from Oregon who worked behind enemy lines in the Japanese-occupied Philippines
40 during World War II, was sentenced to death by the Japanese occupiers and yet survived the war;
41 and

42 Whereas Bonita Gilbert and Bend Heroes Foundation Chairman Dick Tobiason, the sources of
43 the information in this resolution, have increased public awareness of the service and sacrifice of
44 otherwise unknown Oregon civilians; now, therefore,

45 **Be It Resolved by the Legislative Assembly of the State of Oregon:**

HCR 23

1 That we, the members of the Eighty-third Legislative Assembly, recognize and honor the sacri-
2 fice and faithful service to our country on Wake Island during World War II of Oregon's 134 civil-
3 ians, 31 of whom lost their lives as a result of their service; and be it further

4 Resolved, That we thank Bonita Gilbert and Dick Tobiason for their research and diligence in
5 preserving the memory of these heroic civilians.

6
