

Thank you, Chair Manning, and members of the Oregon Senate Committee, on Veterans, Emergency Management, and Federal and World Affairs, for accepting my testimony in support of HCR 23. I am Bonnie Gilbert, the daughter of Wake Island WWII survivor, Ted Olson, and author of *Building for War: The Epic Saga of the Civilian Contractors and Marines of Wake Island in WWII*. I worked with Representative Rick Lewis and Dick Tobiason on HCR 23 and compiled the list of 134 Oregonian civilian contractors on Wake Island in WWII, including thirty-one who died in the war. My testimony will focus on why these civilians deserve recognition by the State of Oregon.

The Wake Island civilian contractors worked for a consortium, Contractors Pacific Naval Air Bases, under contract with the U.S. Navy. Draft boards granted the civilian workers draft deferment for the duration of their work in the national defense.

Through the 16-day siege and final Battle of Wake Island in December 1941 many of these civilians supported and aided the military defense of the island. Commanding officers did not formally induct any civilians into service as they lacked the legal authority to do so. After the war, officers cited 254 civilian volunteers by name and awarded medals for exceptional service and bravery. More unnamed volunteers had contributed to the defense of Wake Island.

The Japanese forces that seized Wake on December 23, 1941, determined that all captured civilian and military personnel were combatants, classified as Prisoners of War. They sent all but ninety-eight POWs in “hell ships” to camps in China and Japan where the prisoners endured abysmal conditions until the end of the war or the end of their lives – whichever came first. The Japanese admiral on Wake ordered the brutal massacre of the remaining ninety-eight civilians on October 7, 1943, and was tried and executed for this war crime in 1947.

After the war, Army Graves Registration Units located and retrieved the war dead from the Pacific Theater, including the Wake civilians killed in action and executed as POWs. The U.S. Congress funded a massive burial program to transfer and identify remains, contact next of kin, and arrange military burials in national or other cemeteries. The Defense POW-MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) continues to search for and identify remains, as its predecessor, JPAC, did for remains found on Wake in 2011 near the 98-massacre site.

Most of the Wake Island war dead, both military and civilian, are buried in national or ABMC cemeteries. The great plaque over the Wake Island mass grave in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific bears the names of 178 military and civilian Americans who lost their lives on the island in the war.

In 1981 Wake Island civilian survivors became eligible for U.S. Navy discharge and VA benefits under the provisions of PL 95-202, the “G.I. Improvement Act of 1977” – too late for more than six hundred men who had died in the war and over the intervening decades. All Wake survivors both civilian and military have passed away now, and we honor their memory.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony in support of HCR 23 and on behalf of the Oregon civilian contractors on Wake Island in WWII.

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