

HCR 23 STAFF MEASURE SUMMARY

House Committee On Emergency Management, General Government, and Veterans

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Meeting Dates: 3/6, 3/13

WHAT THE MEASURE DOES:

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

Fiscal Impact: No fiscal impact

Revenue Impact: No revenue impact

ISSUES DISCUSSED:

- History of Wake Island and the events during World War II
- Personal experiences at Wake Island
- The role of the Oregon State Capitol Foundation and the World War II Memorial

EFFECT OF AMENDMENT:

No amendment.

BACKGROUND:

Five hours following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Wake Island (an atoll approx. 2,000 miles west of Honolulu) was attacked by Japanese bombers. More than 1,100 American civilian contractors were building a United States Navy base on the island, including 134 civilians with Oregon connections. Many of the civilian contractors on Wake Island abandoned their tools and heavy construction equipment to aid the United States Marine Corps detachment during the 16-day siege and final battle against Japanese forces, during which 49 U.S. military personnel and 34 civilians were killed, including two Oregonians.

Japanese forces eventually captured Wake Island and took all surviving Americans as prisoners of war (POWs), transporting more than 1,000 civilian and military POWs to Japan and China, and forcing 98 POWs to remain on Wake Island and perform construction work. 11 Oregonians were among the 98 civilian contractor POWs who were executed on Wake Island by the Japanese on October 7, 1943, nearly two years after their capture and forced labor. 18 Oregon civilian contractors died as prisoners of war in Japanese POW camps in China and Japan during the remaining years of the war.

The Japanese forces on Wake Island surrendered to U.S. forces on September 4, 1945, and in 1981 the United States Department of Defense recognized the civilians who contributed to the defense of Wake Island during World War II as eligible for military discharge, medals and veterans' benefits.