

Enrolled

House Concurrent Resolution 23

Sponsored by Representatives LEWIS, HELFRICH, BOICE; Representatives BREESE-IVERSON, DIEHL, EVANS, GRAYBER, SKARLATOS, Senators MANNING JR, MEEK, SMITH DB, THATCHER

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

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

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

Whereas 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; and

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

Whereas 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 for Japan, now the enemy of the United States; and

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

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

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

Whereas 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; and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Adopted by House March 18, 2025

Readopted by House April 24, 2025

Timothy G. Sekerak, Chief Clerk of House

Julie Fahey, Speaker of House

Adopted by Senate April 21, 2025

Rob Wagner, President of Senate