

# **BUILDING FOR WAR**

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*The Epic Saga  
of the Civilian Contractors  
and Marines of Wake Island  
in World War II*

**BONITA GILBERT**



**CASEMATE**

*Philadelphia & Oxford*

Published in the United States of America and Great Britain in 2012 by  
CASEMATE PUBLISHERS  
908 Darby Road, Havertown, PA 19083  
and  
10 Hythe Bridge Street, Oxford, OX1 2EW

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ISBN 978-1-61200-129-6  
Digital Edition: ISBN 978-1-61200-141-8

Cataloging-in-publication data is available from the Library of Congress and  
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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CHAPTER 4  
PIONEER PARTY

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**BON VOYAGE**

ON DECEMBER 26, 1940, THE USS *WILLIAM WARD BURROWS* STOOD at Pier 31-A in Honolulu, loaded and ready for the contractors' voyage to Wake Island. Holds were crammed with everything from cement mixers to chewing gum and decks towered with lashed-down oil drums, boats, reefers, and steel pontoons. The contractors had given their all-important water distilling equipment a trial run and rechecked their lists to ensure that they had every piece of equipment and all essential supplies. They left nothing to chance, as it would be sixty days before a second supply ship came to Wake. Eighty contractors, "some laden with leis, some with hangovers and some with both," as Captain Dierdorff observed, boarded the ship throughout the day while a gang from the operating base gathered to send them off. Finally, in the late afternoon, the ship pulled away from the dock, the crowd cheered, and tearful wives and girlfriends waved farewell. Outside the harbor, the crew paid out eight hundred feet of towline to a heavily loaded barge, and another towline stretched to a fifty-five-foot tugboat, the *Pioneer*, with crew of four aboard. The *Burrows* set course for Wake Island, two thousand miles away, and the CPNAB Pioneer Party settled in for two long weeks at sea.<sup>1</sup>

Captain Dierdorff noted what a "fine crowd they were—each man an expert in his line." During the voyage, as Dan Teters, Harry Olson, Pete Russell, and the rest were "sitting around in the wardroom yarning, we often had to ask them to translate their rich and racy technical slang into comprehensible terms as they recounted their experiences in revising the topography of

the United States. It soon became evident that we could count both upon their full cooperation and their warm friendship.” Lieutenant Harold Butzine, who had led the survey party on Wake from July to October 1940, and now joined the party as the navy’s RoinC for Wake, counted as the most experienced “Wake hand” in the group. His stories and observations added valuable information to the pioneer party on the westward voyage.<sup>2</sup>

The first week brought one hot, lazy day after another, and the contractors whiled away the time reading, sunbathing, and playing cards. Russell and Olson monitored the loads in the holds and on deck to ensure that they did not shift and they frequently went “overside” to check on the barge and to carry oranges to the seasick tug crew far out in tow. The supervisors enjoyed Captain Dierdorff’s wardroom hospitality, camaraderie, and good food at mealtimes, and passengers and crew alike gathered to watch movies on the top deck under the stars each night.<sup>3</sup>

“The Pacific gets bluer and clearer each day and gleams at night from the phosphorous in the water,” Harry Olson wrote to his wife. “We pass through many schools of flying fish. I believe some make as much as a hundred feet before they hit the water. Once in a while we see an albatross or a frigate bird but otherwise no signs of life. We are south of the ship lanes so we have the sea to ourselves. It is very beautiful but monotonous and I shall be glad to see Wake. Standard Honolulu joke. Guy says to gal: ‘How would you like to go to wake with Harry?’ ‘O.K.,’ says she, ‘but I would rather go to sleep with him.’ I had it pulled on me a dozen times. A low form of humor but stimulating to the imagination.”<sup>4</sup>

A few days into the voyage, all rang in the New Year, 1941, with “lots of bull,” sixteen bells—eight for the old year and eight for the new—and a cheery song written by the ship’s chief engineer:

Heigh Ho! Heigh Ho! It’s out to Wake we go.  
 Heigh Ho! Heigh Ho! With a tug and a barge in tow.  
 From Honolulu we took our start,  
 With the hope the towlines wouldn’t part . . .

Just after New Year’s Day luncheon, the door to the wardroom burst open, and a young bridge messenger announced “Sir! The barge’s done busted loose!”<sup>5</sup>

The ship’s anchor chain that served as part of the long towline had bro-

ken and now the barge, loaded with an eighty-ton crane, several heavy bulldozers, tractors, diesel hoists, and two six thousand-pound anchors, bowled away in the rough seas. Olson took charge of the recovery operation, brought the tug alongside the *Burrows* in thirty-foot swells, and led twelve men to jump for it. "That ride on the tug was the wildest I have ever had," he wrote to Katherine. "When we got alongside the barge it was worse yet but I watched my chance and finally jumped aboard. The others followed when the tug and barge would bounce together." It took four hours to pull the 500 feet of fifteen-inch manila rope and 180 feet of chain up out of the water with hoists, "6 or 8 fathoms at a fleet," observed Captain Dierdorff. "It was late in the afternoon ere the 'bitter end' came in view and we were ready to couple up." Dierdorff backed up the *Burrows*, shot a line to the barge, and gradually made up the tow, the work party returned to the ship in the heaving seas, and they resumed the voyage by dusk. Pete Russell acknowledged that the rescue was "very good work on Olson's part." That evening, the seas were still so heavy that the New Year's dinner of turkey and all the trimmings skidded about on the wardroom table. Pete "had a bit of John's pie as it went by."<sup>6</sup>

Three days later, on the west side of the 180th meridian that marked the international date line and swallowed a day whole, the morning light revealed that the towline had broken again during the night and the unruly barge rode loose, two miles astern. The work party, this time including both Olson and Russell, boarded the *Pioneer* and made for the barge, drenched from the heavy swells that broke over the little tug. Again, they secured the lines, the *Burrows* pulled the barge back to tow, and all hands returned safely to deck. The ship's executive officer vowed that he would not again write "Holiday Routine" in the orders as "the barge invariably misinterpreted these instructions."<sup>7</sup>

*174°E – 20°N, 6 Jan 1941*

*Dear Donna:*

*This is the eleventh day at sea and I hope they find an island pretty quick. There has been a big storm up north and we are getting some monstrous rollers from it broadside. I couldn't sleep last night as every time I would doze off I would roll out of bed. We have had forty-eight hours of it now and everyone is getting tired of it. This desk in my room is bolted to the wall and I have to hang onto it with one hand to keep*

*my chair from sliding out from under me as I write. Otherwise the weather is marvelous.*

*Yesterday we broke the towline again and we had some fun getting it back up again. When you are out in the rough sea in a small boat the ship looks very comforting as you know it is the only thing above the water for a thousand miles. After we got the towline aboard and while we were connecting it again, some of the fellows caught a shark. It was about eight feet long and ran mostly to head. It provided a lot of excitement when they finally got it on deck as it thrashed around a lot. They finally cut its tail off and threw it back in the sea and its antics were very funny as it could not submerge or swim in a straight line. Of course it only lasted a couple minutes as the other sharks attacked it right away and ate it up. A rather grim sort of humor but the shark would do the same or worse to one of us if he could. Anyway it all provided a sort of break in the monotony. All we do is eat, sleep and go to the show. Of course there is endless talk of the job, particularly the unloading [at Wake]. We have landed this cargo so many times the boxes are practically worn out.*

*The movies are under the stars. It seems quite unusual to me. The screen is fastened to the stern mast up high and the speakers just below it. This is a pretty big ship and has six decks above the water line. The picture can be seen from the three upper decks aft and everyone picks out his own favorite spot. Most everyone sits in a steamer chair. The moon is at the first quarter and of course the sea is very beautiful with the moonlight on it. It is always just warm enough at night to sit out in shirt sleeves in comfort so it is a very enjoyable experience. Most of the pictures I would class as turkeys but once in a while we get a good one. . . .*

*We should reach Wake in about sixty hours and then the fun starts. I will be glad to step on land again but we will have to stay on the boat for the first two weeks.*

*Love, Robin*

*I have a spare day I could lend you if you should get behind in your business.*

*7:30 P.M. Wed. Jan 8: The lights of Wake just came into view. It is stormy and the sea is running high so I don't know if we can land in the morning.*

### ARRIVAL AT WAKE

The *Burrows* raised the outline of Wake Island early in the evening on January 8, 1941, but stood away during the stormy night. The morning light revealed a forbidding sight: a low, brushy, horseshoe-shaped atoll ringed by crashing surf. The afternoon of January 9 a landing party of ten, including Captain Dierdorff, Lieutenant Butzine, Dan Teters, Olson, and Russell, boarded a motor launch and aimed for the notch where Pan American unloaded freight. The view from up close silenced the party. Wake was a “sorry looking sight” that day, Dierdorff recalled. The floating pier, short marine railway, two small boats, and all of Pan American’s unloading equipment still lay in a tangled mess of debris where the October typhoon had spat it out. The landing party made for the shore two at a time in a little skiff they had towed with them, jumping out on the coral-studded beach of Wilkes Island, Wake’s left hand. Their first job was to clear the area of the “unholy alliance” of typhoon-tossed gasoline barrels and dynamite. The men gingerly carried the sticks of dynamite some distance down the beach to explode them safely.<sup>8</sup>

Pan American operators radioed the news of the *Burrows* arrival to their Midway station and on to the CPNAB operating base at Pearl Harbor. The rain, wind, and high seas had abated, and the Wake operator reported ideal weather for the landing of the CPNAB pioneer party. Until the contractors erected their own radio shack, “Pan Air” was their only means of contact with the outside world. The *Burrows* had been out of range for several days, so George Youmans was relieved to get word of the arrival. A few days later Youmans wrote a report to Harry Morrison in Boise, including a brief description of the ship’s misadventures en route and stating that he was “glad to have Olson along with the expedition, as I think he is an exceptionally good man under the conditions we will encounter.” The conditions the men encountered upon their arrival at Wake promised to test them all.<sup>9</sup>

“Wake is just as I had it pictured,” Harry wrote home on January 10. “It is low and brushy, a sort of ironwood, quite dense with much evidence of high waves going over it. There is no soil or sand underneath solid coral. . . . The sea water is the wonderful part. It is warm, 80°, limpid, clear and incredibly blue. Each degree of sunlight gives it another shade of blue and it is so clear one can see bottom plainly at 60 ft. depth. And full of fish of all colors and shapes. The fellows dive and spear them. The fish are not afraid of a man under water and you can swim right up to them.”<sup>10</sup>

The endless planning sessions in Honolulu and on the *Burrows* proved to be time well spent when it came time to unload the ship. The risks to ship and cargo (not to mention life and limb) were great, but the pioneer party attacked the job with confidence. The motor launch *Hopei* and tug *Pioneer* cast off from the *Burrows* to carry workers and blasting equipment across the swells and surf to the shore. Unable to anchor, the *Burrows* maneuvered offshore, altering course and speed to enable workers to unload supplies onto the lighter and to keep the unwieldy cargo barge under control.

In the small landing cove a crew went to work with an air compressor, dynamite, and jackhammers to drill and blast coral heads and boulders to widen and deepen the area for the heavy cargo barge. Meanwhile, the little lighter ferried supplies from the *Burrows* to Wilkes Island for a first camp. On the third day, the *Pioneer* towed the cargo barge to a position about three hundred feet off the cove and men attached it to cables anchored on the beach. The dynamite crew hurried to finish clearing the cove in time to land the barge at high tide that afternoon. Down to the wire, they had no time to verify depth by taking soundings in the murky water, so fifteen men lined up on the shore, linked hands, and strode into the water until it was up to their necks, checking the bottom for obstructions with their feet. They signaled the O.K.

Pulled by diesel hoists, the barge moved slowly toward the beach, then ground to a halt forty feet short of the landing. "This did not stop Harry Olsen who was directing the operation," Captain Dierdorff wrote. Olson changed the trim of the barge by moving the two heavy bulldozers on it, and nudged the barge into place with its bow eight feet above the beach. "Ensued then one of the prettiest displays of teamwork that I have ever witnessed," Dierdorff continued. As the crane operator dropped a ramp to the beach, cat skidders drove the bulldozers and other heavy equipment to the edge where they "teetered precariously on the brink," and then quickly scuttled off. The ramp was too steep for the crane itself, however, so bulldozer operators built up a coral ramp, and the crane laid it with timbers from the barge. Night had long since fallen by the time the ramp was ready for the crane. A full moon and headlights lit the scene as the crane operator inched the valuable piece of machinery off the barge and down the ramp. The pioneer party held its collective breath, and then let out a great cheer as the crane landed safely on the level shore. Now they were in business.<sup>11</sup>