

# **BUILDING FOR WAR**

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

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## INTRODUCTION

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WAKE ISLAND TEEMED WITH ACTIVITY DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF December 1941. More than a thousand civilian contractors swarmed over the atoll, working around the clock to build barracks and storehouses, grade runways, dig channels, and dredge coral for a naval air base. Several hundred military personnel scrambled to set up communications, shore batteries, and anti-aircraft guns along the V-shaped atoll. Ships rocked offshore, Pan American Clippers shared the lagoon with navy patrol planes, Flying Fortresses stopped just long enough to refuel on their way to the Philippines, and a squadron of Wildcat fighters flew in off the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise*. Sitting two thousand miles west of Hawaii and just six hundred miles north of Japan's Marshall Islands, Wake was well on its way to becoming a fully-equipped forward base for the United States Navy as it prepared for eventual war with Japan. At the end of that busy week, the civilians and most of the military personnel enjoyed a rare day off. The next day, December 8, war came suddenly and without warning to Wake. Across the international date line, it was December 7, 1941, the day that would live in infamy. For the civilian contractors on Wake Island, it was the beginning of a long nightmare.

Dwarfed by the ever-expanding Pearl Harbor library, a modest shelf holds a growing collection of works on Wake Island and the fate of the Americans caught there. The Marine Corps-led defense of the atoll dominates the accounts of Wake. The surprise attack, sixteen-day siege, and bitter surrender to Japanese forces comprise a campaign small enough in geography, time,

and sources to recount in detail, yet large enough in drama and heroism to swell the hardest heart. The stories told by civilian survivors also dwell on those dramatic December days and the dark years of internment as prisoners of war. By all accounts, the months leading up to December 1941 serve as a mere preface to the main event. This book is the first to focus on the story of the civilian contractors who took a risk, came to Wake, and built a naval air base from scratch, only to see it (and themselves) snatched away by a grossly underestimated enemy. The story sheds new light on why the Americans were taken by such surprise the day the sky fell in.

The massive defense contracts funded by Congress at the end of the 1930s opened the door out of a decade of Depression, and American business and labor eagerly seized the new opportunities. War raged in Europe and Asia, close enough to warrant throwing off the cloak of isolationism, but far enough away for Americans to enjoy the fresh air of economic stimulation. The return of jobs and decent wages and the commitment to national military strength brought a flush of optimism to the nation. The mainland defense jobs quickly attracted mobs of men, but jobs in the Pacific demanded more careful consideration. The distance and dangers of the farthest Pacific island jobs meant greater risk for greater reward, but many workers from the Northwest and California took the plunge, confident that Uncle Sam would take care of the “danger” aspect. Distance and time were the chief concerns for many men and their families: homesickness made many a heart grow fonder, but the long separation strained some relationships to the breaking point.

In the decades following World War II, historians have reexamined the debacle of Pearl Harbor from many perspectives, but paid scant attention to the angle represented by “Contractors Pacific Naval Air Bases” (CPNAB). In 1939, the U.S. Navy contracted with a consortium of civilian construction companies to expand the fleet base at Pearl Harbor and build strategic outlying bases, including Midway and Wake, far out in the Pacific. From 1939 to 1943, the civilian organization grew from three companies to ten, from five projects to dozens, and from a handful of men to tens of thousands. The unprecedented no-bid construction contracts grew from \$15.5 million to \$332 million at their termination in December 1943, making CPNAB the largest defense contractor in history, up to that time.<sup>1</sup> (\$332 million in 1943 is equivalent to about \$4.43 billion in 2012.) The prewar interaction between the CPNAB defense contractors and the navy on one of those proj-

ects, Wake Island, reveals prevailing attitudes and inefficiencies that contributed to the lack of readiness for the coordinated Japanese strike in the Pacific in December 1941.

The only full-length treatment of the CPNAB history, now long out of print, was commissioned by the CPNAB executives in 1944: David O. Woodbury's *Builders for Battle: How the Pacific Naval Bases were Constructed* (E. P. Dutton and Co., 1946). Historians have regularly used Woodbury as a key source for the prewar defense contracts and projects, and his work provides many valuable details and a lively description of events. However, the contractors commissioned Woodbury to write their story, and his book lacks perspective and objectivity, particularly with respect to relations between the navy and contractors. The author was at once too close to principals and events, and too far from the inside stories. Writing in the final year of war, Woodbury was blocked from classified navy documents and correspondence, and unable or unwilling to seek out pertinent business details hidden in reams of company paperwork. Nearly all of the contractors had gone home by then; others, including the Wake prisoners, had yet to come home to tell their story. On a short leash, Woodbury related the joint efforts of navy officers and Pacific defense contractors as a string of heroic accomplishments. As for Wake, Woodbury blamed Congress for its inexcusably late start in appropriating base construction funds. "Because Capitol Hill dallied, the Japs stole from us an advance base with most of the heavy work done, fitted with much valuable equipment," wrote Woodbury. "Wake was the glory of the American fighting man but the shame of the sluggard country behind them."<sup>2</sup>

Congressional approvals and appropriations to fortify island bases in the western Pacific can only be considered "late" in hindsight. The capture of Wake was due to a far more complex set of circumstances, one that has its origins in the acquisition of an impossibly far-flung Pacific empire at the turn of the century and the obligation to protect it against an increasingly aggressive neighbor. Decades of underfunding and isolationism undercut American naval capabilities in the Pacific, but once Congress made the commitment to expansion of military defenses, the navy found itself swimming in a sea of red tape. Although time was of the essence, overlapping jurisdictions and interdepartmental frictions slowed the decision-making progress and complicated logistics. Then as now, defense contractors underwent careful scrutiny to ensure against shoddy construction or excessive profiteering

at the public's expense. With the Nye Committee investigations of World War I munitions manufacturers fresh in the public memory, the CPNAB projects were subject to budgets and deadlines, strict government oversight, and layers of navy supervision that attended every plan and decision. In addition, the diplomatic and economic decisions of the Roosevelt administration heightened conflict with Japan rather than ameliorating it, and push came to shove before the Pacific bases were ready for battle.

The story of the Pacific defense contractors also reveals a prevailing national bias as it follows preparations for a war according to American strategy. New warships, planes bristling with hardware, and strategically located outlying bases were intended to intimidate Japan and protect U.S. interests in the Pacific. The nation and its military placed great faith in American technological superiority and its permanent lease on the moral high ground—dangerous preconceptions in an industrialized world. Racial bias blinded Americans to the possibility that the Japanese could develop and employ technology capable of besting their own. In *War without Mercy*, historian John Dower offers a compelling argument that Westerners shared this disparaging attitude toward the Japanese in the prewar period and consistently underestimated Japan's intentions and military capabilities. The fate of the men caught on Wake Island demonstrates the consequences of those dangerous preconceptions.<sup>3</sup>

While ostensibly built as defensive installations, the remote Pacific bases really had little in the way of practical defensive capabilities. On Wake frequent delays in approvals, altered sequence of the building program, and belated defensive measures demonstrate that the navy underestimated the potential for direct attack. In fact, Wake's primary role in the navy's secret offensive strategy was to serve as a base for the attack and seizure of bases in the nearby Japanese-held Marshall Islands once war began.<sup>4</sup> In theory, the base would be complete and the civilian contractors long gone by the time the fighting started. The navy had no contingency plans for the civilians in case of attack except to anticipate that some of them would volunteer to aid the defense. The possibility that Japan might capture the island was too remote to warrant consideration. The civilian contractors on Wake watched the marines arrive, heard the news on the radio, and worked at a feverish pace as the navy's demands multiplied during the fall of 1941, but they shrugged off distant dangers: Uncle Sam would take care of them.

The events that transpired in December 1941 were inconceivable to the

band of contractors that first set foot on Wake Island nearly a year before and to the hundreds who followed as the months went by. Their job was to build an air base, and their battles were with the raging sea and the stubborn coral. Armed with dynamite, powerful machinery, and the can-do attitude that would carry over to the navy's seabees, the civilian contractors tackled the job they were hired to do during that year before enemy bombers dropped out of the clouds: carve out a military toehold in the middle of the vast Pacific.