

Gilbert, Bonita, *Building for War. The Epic Saga of the Civilian Contractors and Marines of Wake Island in World War II*. (Philadelphia and Oxford: Casemate Publishers, 2012) Maps, Photographs, end notes, bibliography, index, appendices. 364 pages. ISBN: 978-1-61200-129-6

In December 1941, the seemingly unstoppable Japanese advanced across the Pacific and throughout Southeast Asia was surprisingly stopped, at least for a while, and bloodied while trying to take the small mid-Pacific atoll of Wake Island. The resistance put up by the small marine defense garrison and aircraft was as much a matter of heroism as it was Japanese overconfidence. Wake Island was not prepared in any fashion for a prolonged defense, as were most of the United States' Pacific possessions in the early days of the war. The story about the island's defenders has been told before in books, magazine articles, histories, television documentaries, and even a film released within months of the actual battle. Virtually the entire story of Wake Island has revolved around the Marine garrison, with little mention of the large number of contract construction workers who were trying to get the atoll ready for war. The story of the contract civilian workers, who built the Wake Island structures and suffered through the subsequent imprisonment and, in some cases, murder by the Japanese, is the core subject of *Building for War*. It should be noted that the author, Bonita Gilbert is both the granddaughter of one of the civilian construction foreman from the principal company, Morrison-Knudson, and the daughter of one of the workers who was captured by the Japanese after the battle. Not that this interferes with the story. In fact, using correspondence from both men, Gilbert resurrects a human story that has largely been lost in the epic narratives of the Pacific War.

As Gilbert recounts the story of Wake Island, the plans for the buildup of its facilities and defenses were simply a matter of too little, too late. While surveys of the island were conducted in the mid and late 1930s, the vote for funding and plans were not done until 1939. To this point, the only presence on the island was a Pan-American Airways station that serviced the famous Clipper flights. The US Navy's ultimate plans called for a submarine base, radio station, and an airfield capable of handling large aircraft like the B-17. Wake was to be part of a constellation of island bases – Palmyra, Johnson Island, Midway, etc – designed, surprisingly, to support an American *offensive* across the Pacific. Little thought was given to the possibility that the Japanese would attack Wake Island.

Once begun, the buildup was a slow and tedious process, faced with delays in contractor manning – despite the late Depression unemployment, not many workers were willing to face the isolation and hardship of working on atoll patches in the mid-Pacific. Morrison-Knudson had its hands full trying to recruit enough of the skilled workers to keep the building going. But the workers had to contend with the Navy's slow and delivery of supplies. Gilbert tells us about the various delays as construction supplies sat on the wharves in Pearl Harbor, unable to move because the Navy's transport was stretched. Then, again, the Navy would change priorities, pulling workers from barracks to getting the island's runway to accommodate the transfer of B-17s to the Philippines. The marine garrison was also left on the atoll to fend for itself. Important installations, especially an early warning radar station were planned, but never built. Wake Island was never close to being prepared for war. The heroic defense was largely a measure of the Marines Corps garrison, which itself was never fully deployed.

After its capture, the civilian contractors were interned by the Japanese. Many were recruited to “complete” construction on the atoll, but they played a cat and mouse games with the Japanese occupiers – slow-rolling construction merely to earn extra rations. Most of the workers eventually were transferred to Japan on the “Hell ships” to work as virtual slaves in Japanese mines and factories. Their situation remained unknown to American authorities and their families until the end of the war.

There are a few errors in *Building for War*. The Japanese occupation of Indochina was a two-step affair. Northern Indochina was occupied in September 1940 as Japanese troops overran French border forts and occupied Hanoi and Haiphong. In July 1941, Japan occupied southern Indochina and set up airbases that directly threatened the Philippines and British Malaya. Also, the American exploitation of the main Japanese cipher machine, codenamed Purple (the intelligence from it was known as MAGIC), began in September 1940 not the spring of 1941. Yet *Building for War* is a fine addition to the literature of the pre-war Pacific, giving an insight into the relative late and haphazard preparations by the United States to fortify and upgrade its island possessions. But it adds an important human element – the story of the civilian contractors trapped on an island in a war for which they never signed up.