

BUILDING FOR WAR by Bonita Gilbert

Reviewed by Ronald J. Wilper (nephew of Redmond J. "Jim" Wilper – one of the forgotten 98)

March 27, 2013

As the nephew of one of the civilian contractors taken prisoner, enslaved and eventually murdered on Wake Island during World War II, I read Bonnie Gilbert's Building for War hoping to learn something about the Uncle I never met. This book greatly exceeded my expectations. It is meticulously documented, delightfully well written, and intimately personal.

The early chapters are about the author's own family living in the Pacific Northwest during the great depression. I feel my father and his brothers in these characters. I see them as young men making a living in Idaho, looking for an opportunity to earn enough money to set up the family in their own construction business. I see the oldest brother, Jim reading Harry Morrison's ad in the Idaho Statesman asking for skilled carpenters to go a million miles from Boise to earn handsome wages. I see him shaking hands with my Dad and Uncle Frank and boarding the bus that would take him to California. I imagine his trip to Honolulu on the Luxury Liner and on a cramped naval vessel for the final leg of the journey to tiny Wake Island.

Through her characters, her own father and grandfather, I know how Uncle Jim felt working and living as one of a thousand ambitious young Americans building something so big, so important and so far from home.

When the first attack came, just hours after Pearl Harbor, I imagine Uncle Jim taking shelter from the bombs. I imagine him joining in the work moving the gun emplacements to foil the next attack. I feel a swell of pride when I think of how my grandmother and all the friends and families back home must have felt when the news arrived that the boys on Wake were holding out, repelling attack after relentless attack.

I can see Uncle Jim with the other exhausted men after the inevitable invasion, kneeling day and night on the airfield. I can only imagine the torture they endured. As most of the men were crammed into the stinking hold of the ships that would take them to prison camps in Japan and China, I imagine Uncle Jim and the others left on Wake to work as slaves.

Uncle Jim was one of the "forgotten 98" as they came to be known, who survived forced labor and starvation for nearly two more years. On October 7, 1943, as American military forces were poised to recapture Wake, a frightened Japanese officer bound them, marched them to the beach and machine gunned them all to death.

The latter chapters of the book touch on the aftermath of the war. It helped me appreciate the mental anguish my grandmother was said to have suffered as she waited for word that finally came about the fate of her eldest son.

Like Laura Hillenbrand's Unbroken, Building for War paints a vivid picture of these events. It rings true, corroborated by impeccable historical research. It should be read by everyone with a personal connection with the war in the Pacific and by anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the life and times of those who lived through it or died in it.