BOOK REVIEW


reviewed by

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The events of World War II in the Pacific have left behind a large number of military installations, created by both the Japanese and the US forces. Since the war’s end, these sites have been a hazard to the local community because of the unexploded ammunition they contain, and an attraction to tourists wishing to see remnants of the war. Some of the sites have seen the attention of heritage managers in an effort to make an educated and informed decision about which of the sites should be conserved, and how, and which sites should be left to decay. More recently, the technology and architecture underlying these sites has seen the attention of war gamers, both playing virtual war games and desktop games with models. This has created a new demand for books on the topic.

Pictorial books illustrating the appearance of the Japanese Defences of the Pacific theatre of the war are aplenty, usually replete with photographs taken by the US forces after the occupation of an island. Only few, however, provide the technical detail needed to understand the Japanese construction. The two books reviewed here do so.

Colt Denfeld’s *Japanese World War II Fortifications and Military Structures in the Central Pacific* has become a classic since its first publication in December 1981. It has gone through several reprints and editions, including a format change from A4 to A5. Denfeld sets out the major types of Japanese military construction in Micronesia, drawing on modern archaeological assessments, as well as drawings and documentation carried out by the US forces for their intelligence assessments of Japanese military strength. He sets the defences into context, reviewing the Japanese defence structure on the major base islands of Kwajalein, Chuuk, Pohnpei, Saipan, Tinian, Guam and Rota, as well as Palau and Yap. Each of the islands had their own geographic differences, from coral atoll to high island, bi it with a volcanic base or limestone terraces. The environmental conditions provided different opportunities and requirements for the establishment of defences.
However, the major ammunition storage structures and personnel shelters were of a standardised design, as were the reinforced power plants and buildings for base command and air wing. While Japanese coastal defence doctrine was rigid and saw the construction of gun batteries that were identical in layout, these local conditions forced the garrisons to vary the plans. The beaches were defended by foxholes and small shelters, often ad hoc dugouts roofed by coconut logs. Very well camouflaged—and thus invisible to aerial photography—they posed a serious threat to the US landings on Tarawa and accounted for many casualties. Only in the later stages of the war, essentially when Japanese-occupied Kiribati had been re-captured and the Japanese bases on the Marshall Islands attacked, did the Japanese defence strategy change. Where feasible, caves were widened or dug both for personnel shelters and gun emplacements. The second part of Denfeld’s book provides details on the construction of only the standardised buildings, with some notes on the Japanese cave designs. The non-standard beach defences are not figured.

The quality of the artwork in Denfeld’s book has not changed since its initial release twenty-five years ago, with many drawings reproducing the US intelligence documentation of World War II. The most recent reprinting of the book seems to have been carried out from a printed copy, with the concomitant loss of image quality (for example most of the mid-tones of black-and-white photographs have disappeared). While the appearance of the publication is rather dated, the content is still valid and useful—which is a great credit to the author. That said, the book could well do with a proper revision, incorporating new information derived from the many archaeological surveys of World War II sites in the region.

Gordon Rottman’s *Japanese Pacific Island Defences 1941-45* is a new publication, part of Osprey Publishing’s series on World War II technology and history. The slim book purposefully avoids the large defense constructions. Instead, it focuses on the beach defences and the other temporary and make-shift structures and weapons positions, such as soil revetments and concrete embrasures set into coral boulders at the waterline. The text describes the types of fortifications in some detail and also adds information on the types of weapons used or emplaced here. The book has a large remit, drawing examples from the Central Pacific to New Guinea and the Philippines. While the book acknowledges that no two islands were alike, and that especially these temporary structures were location specific, the text tends to gloss over locational detail and thus does not allow the reader to assess which situation the description can apply to. Many of the illustrations do not provide information of location either, leaving the reader in confusion. It is not always clear to the reader why certain types of defences had to be used. For example, in the discussion on coastal defence gun emplacements, Rottman mentions that “open emplacement were still used in much of the Marshalls…such positions in the Carolines were protected by concrete or the guns were positioned in caves” (p. 38). There is no indication that because the Marshall Islands are all atolls cave-type emplacements were impossible. Unless the reader has a very good grasp of the local geography, wrong conclusions will be drawn.

The book is well illustrated, including some 3D artwork by Ian Palmer, but the illustrations are an odd mix of various vintages, origins and quality. The publication would have benefited from a complete reworking of the old illustrations. As it stands, it is a jarring mix of primitive line sketches, taken from World War II vintage studies, and modern computer graphics. Throughout the book the author, and illustrator, mix metric and Imperial measurements, without any discernible logic. A major omission of the book is the lack of attribution of the illustrations. While there is short bibliography, *inter alia* drawing on Denfeld’s work, the sources for any assertions as well as for the illustrations is not provided. A endnote section could easily have done so and added to the value of the book.

Both books have weaknesses and strengths. While they nicely complement each other, we are still waiting for a comprehensive study.