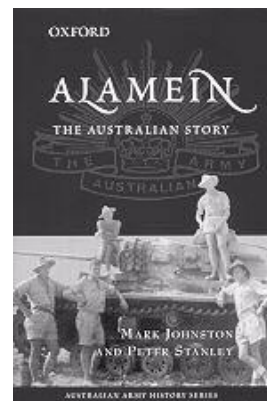


Alamein: The Australian Story

Mark Johnston & Peter Stanley

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy



A great British historian, Tawney, advised that to be any good as a historian, one must master the documents and the archives, but even more importantly a historian must wear a stout pair of boots. History, he argued, lacked surety, unless the writer had walked the ground and had an intimacy with the environment.

Johnston and Stanley have read the Australian, British and German records and their knowledge of the ground has helped them paint a clearer picture of the battle and the physical conditions the combatants faced each day.

Alamein according to the authors ‘... was arguably Australia’s greatest single contribution to Allied victory’ ... in World War II. They make a powerful case that we should celebrate Alamein with Tobruk and Kokoda as great Australian military achievements.

Johnston and Stanley set themselves the following tasks. They seek to give Australians and others a better and more accurate understanding of how Alamein was a vital turning point in World War II and the significance of the Australian forces’ role in the battle. The book seeks to counter the huge British literature on the North African campaign, which often fails to pay the Australian forces their due. The narrative, covering the period July to November 1942, seeks to provide a rounded account of the Australian contribution from the level of the digger through to that of the commanders. Finally, they aim to give a balanced assessment of the Ninth Division’s contribution to the British Commonwealth’s effort in the theatre.

How well have Johnston and Stanley achieved their goals? The remainder of the book provides a wealth of detail, explanations and conclusions, which meet their objectives and more. This is one of the most readable military histories I have had the pleasure of reading in over a decade. The attention to detail in facts, figures, the past debates and in the use of fresh and new material is outstanding.

The context of the North African campaign is set with a carefully argued case for the complexity of the war faced by Auchinleck. Given the defeat of many Italian forces, at first sight, it seems odd that the British forces took so long to defeat the remaining Italians and the Africa Korps.

Johnston and Stanley show how the geostrategic situation placed huge and conflicting, demands upon Auchinleck. He had to maintain control of an area, which encompassed Cairo to the Cape and from Egypt through

the Middle East to India. Two strategic assets were of vital concern — the Suez Canal and the Middle East oil supplies.

The great unknown threat was the possibility of a pincer movement by the German forces from the west and the east. Given the huge Soviet losses in the initial German onslaught, and the German success against the Soviet winter campaign, it was not impossible for them to develop a pincer attack on the Middle East. The worse case was that the Africa Korps would sweep across North Africa and into Egypt and with a Soviet collapse in the Caucasus, the Germans could swing south with a spearhead driving through Turkey into Persia, Syria and Palestine.

Johnston and Stanley stress the importance of Auchinleck’s dilemma. He dispersed his forces denying himself the concentration of troops needs to defeat Rommel quickly. They note that ‘Auchinleck was wrong: in hindsight’. The German thoughts on any possible pincer movement were only excited later as an opportunistic idea. The chance of a pincer strategy never developed. Although in the strategic climate of Christmas 1941–42, when the Axis forces were winning everywhere, the possible eastern attack had to be covered with a screening force. The first half of 1942 added successes for the Germans and the Japanese, who swept through East and South East Asia. The war in North Africa had swung from the edge of victory to the Germans having forces inside Egypt.

In the prelude to Alamein battle, four factors had harmed the British forces. Leadership at all levels had been a failure. Ritchie failed to exert his will on his forces and the battlefield. The co-ordination of arms was almost completely lacking in contrast to the almost seamlessness of Rommel’s method of mobile warfare.

The British forces had a unique advantage in Ultra intelligence briefings, although it was not until mid-1942 that the necessary leadership and trained forces were available to make best use of it. Moreover, Rommel’s intelligence operators were able to make good use of the British failure to maintain strict radio and signal discipline.

The iron law of logistics exercised a decisive limit on operations. The further one operated from base supplies, the greater the amounts of fuel that had to be used to carry forward each ton of supplies. The harsh environment also added to the difficulty of supply and service life of vehicles, weapons and men. Rommel’s successful advance into Egypt now put him at the logistical disadvantage. The German

forces applied battlefield deployment of armour, artillery, anti-tank guns and infantry in a more effective way than the British forces. Ritchie's defeat, and the loss of Tobruk, which had been held for eight months by the Australians, was a crucial turning point in the supply of equipment. The defeat led Roosevelt to help Churchill with a massive surge in the re-equipment and supply of the Eighth Army. The battle of Alamein was the first time in North Africa that these four elements were finally changed and applied to the benefit of the Eighth Army.

The Australian Ninth Division played a key role in the battle of Alamein. The Division comprised some 17,000 men, the core of whom had successfully defended Tobruk. Commanded by General Leslie Morshead, the division's success in the Alamein battles was built upon skilled leadership, a highly resourceful staff, increased supplies of equipment, combined arms operations and the repeated courageous actions of small groups of troops.

The 10 July 1942 battle by the Division's 26th Brigade, which took key elevated objectives on Rommel's left flank, captured Company 621 an important signals intelligence unit. This attack proved the efficacy of combined-arms operations and has been identified as the beginning of the end for the Axis forces in North Africa. The Australians showed that the Germans were not supermen. The powerful counter attacks involving Stukas, artillery, panzers and infantry were beaten. Over 1000 prisoners were captured; probably 20 tanks and more than a dozen guns were destroyed. This decisive action was to set the pattern for the eventual defeat of Rommel's forces at Alamein.

Johnston and Stanley lay out in detail the subsequent development of Montgomery's command, planning, training and eventual defeat of the Africa Korps defences at Alamein. They note that Montgomery's detailed preparation was flawed by having no plan for the pursuit and capture of the surviving forces.

The book carries through to the end of the campaign and meets Johnston and Stanley original objectives. They demonstrate conclusively that Alamein should be one of our national celebrations of military excellence.

The result of painstaking scholarly research and writing, this volume maintains the high standards of the Army History Series and Oxford University Press. The excellent text is enhanced with 29 excellent maps, 24 pages of notes, 8 pages of bibliography and an extensive index. It also has a useful list of abbreviations although this has been, unfortunately, placed at the back of the book.

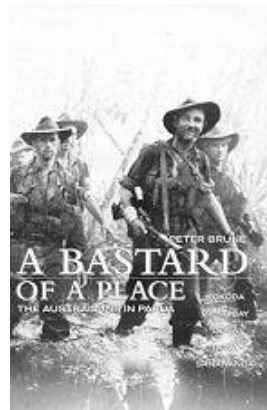
The lessons of the Alamein campaign still have relevance for the ADF. Success in battle can only be secured with good leadership at all levels, close all-arms co-operation, thorough and creative planning, the use of initiative, the ability to call for massive fire support on demand, the plentiful supply of modern arms and equipment, and well-trained and determined troops. ♦

Mark Johnston & Peter Stanley, *Alamein: The Australian Story*, OUP, South Melbourne, 2002, Hardback, 314pp, RRP \$59.95.

A Bastard of a Place: The Australians in Papua

Peter Brune

Reviewed by Peter Ryan



This is by no means Peter Brune's first book about Papua in World War II. So *A Bastard of a Place* proceeds with welcome confidence and competence. Brune (like Les Carlyon with his magnificent *Gallipoli*) in his own stout boots has covered kilometres

of the weary terrain. Both authors know that there is no other way of getting the scene exactly right.

This is a big book with various ambitious themes that at times elbow each other aside, seeking attention. Brune tries to make the three Papuan mini-theatres coherent and contextual so we can appreciate the relation to each other of Kokoda, Milne Bay and Gona–Buna–Sanananda. He thinks (and I agree) that Kokoda occupies a disproportionate share of Australia's public imagination and fame. Kokoda was but one phase of the Papuan campaign and the others—just as bloody and just as heroic—are less understood and renowned. For example, the Australian victory at Milne Bay should enjoy far more fame than it does, as the first land defeat inflicted on the enemy in the whole Japanese war. (Not, it must be stressed, that Brune plays down the Kokoda achievement).

It is marvellous what he has packed into this book. We see the reality of fighting along appalling mountain tracks and through stinking coastal swamps; the character and spirit of the young Australian troops, their courage and suffering; the problems of front-line supply—usually on strong black shoulders; the evacuation of casualties, frequently on the identical black shoulders that had just laid down a load of rations or ammunition carried forward.

We see aspects of the wider context of World War II as it ravaged the globe. A surprising amount relates in one way or another to the Papuan campaign. For example, the experience of Australian Imperial Force troops in their tough battles in the Middle East and Greece turned them into superb fighting units, although they still had to learn even the rudiments of how to fight in the jungle.

Australia's military effectiveness was hobbled by our absurd system of two armies: the AIF, ready to serve anywhere in the world; and the militia, enlisted for home defence only and often disparaged as 'choccos'—chocolate soldiers—although by no