

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.

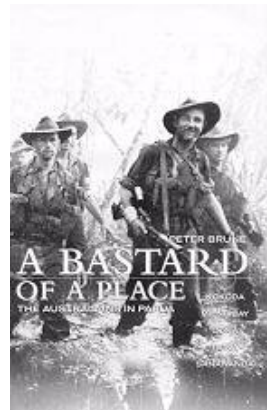
The lessons of the Alamein campaign still have relevance for the ADF. Success in battle can only be secured with good leadership at all levels, close all-arms co-operation, thorough and creative planning, the use of initiative, the ability to call for massive fire support on demand, the plentiful supply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

means were all of them conscripts.

Brune is judicious in his elucidation of this vexed matter. He concludes that, although the AIF and militia began sometimes with mutual suspicion, before long they operated together with respect, acknowledging that they were both, after all, Australian. No AIF veterans today would deny the heroism of the militia's 39th Battalion that fought with them on Kokoda. And as soon as the Australian government allowed, militiamen in their tens of thousands volunteered to transfer to the AIF.

Brune appreciates the wider strategy. For example, the Australians in Papua, although under the supreme command of US General Douglas MacArthur, seemed to carry alone the burden of the land fighting. Brune reminds us that the superb, bloody fighting on Guadalcanal Island by the US Marines significantly eased Japanese pressure on the Australians battling it out on the Kokoda Track.

The author relies extensively on our official war history, especially on Dudley McCarthy's humane and heartrending Volume V (*Kokoda to Wau*), and on classics such as Raymond Paull's *Retreat from Kokoda*; Vic Austin's book about his own brave 39th Battalion, *To Kokoda and Beyond*; Sydney Rowell's autobiography *Full Circle*; and 'Blue' Steward's immortal *Recollections of a Regimental Medical Officer*.

But Brune's many detailed interviews with serving soldiers, and his personal acquaintance with the track enable him to treat those authors as—almost—collaborators rather than as mere references. (Professor David Horner believes Brune is the most knowledgeable expert on the participation of Australians in the Papua campaign).

The book is agreeably free from errors of fact and there are few significant omissions. I would have liked just a mention of Lieutenant Colonel John Minogue. When no generals and few staff officers risked muddying their boots, Minogue, of his own initiative, slogged forward with his pack on his back, sending terse messages back to New Guinea Force Headquarters in Port Moresby—to small effect. Brune's account of the media's role is admirable—there was no television in those days. Journalists Osmar White and Chester Wilmot should remain famous for their courage and their dispatches, as should Damien Parer and George Silk for their pictures. Aspiring war correspondents today might still turn to them for lessons.

The besetting horrors of Kokoda are frequently blamed on the terrain, the climate and disease. But they derive equally from Australia's normal peacetime neglect of its armed forces. The start of the Pacific War saw us with little equipment, limited mobility, no developed doctrine and no troops trained in jungle warfare. There were no staff studies of, for example, supply in tropical areas. We sent our first soldiers

into battle at Kokoda wearing pale khaki uniforms designed for the desert—each man a perfect target for Japanese marksmen against the deep-green background.

By Papuan standards, the Kokoda terrain was not especially tough. The country behind Salamaua and Lae and down the Finisterre Mountains to Madang was higher, colder, steeper and rougher, yet we fought there with efficiency—after we had learned how to do it.

Brune's sharp critique of the Australian and US high command and staff, and of the Australian government, moves to rage and despair, but it is well-founded and judiciously told. MacArthur and General Thomas Albert Blamey emerge shabbily; any colonel or brigadier successful in battle along the Kokoda Track or elsewhere ran the risk of the sack from jealous superiors.

A Bastard of a Place is a very good book—even the index, by today's standards, is useful. A chronology of events (such as those in the official war histories) would have been a help. But Brune has produced what may be called almost an encyclopedia of the vital Papuan campaign. Any high school that lacks a copy in its library has ceased to teach Australian history. ♦

Peter Brune, 'A Bastard of a Place: The Australians in Papua', Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2003, casebound and jacketed, 691pp, RRP \$49.95.

The Return of the Exiles: Australia's Repatriation of the Indonesians 1945–47

Frank Bennett

Reviewed by Professor Jamie Mackie

In mid-October 1945, barely two months after the Japanese surrender announcement and the Indonesian proclamation of independence on August 17, the *Esperance Bay* left Sydney for Jakarta (then Batavia) to repatriate 1416 of the 2856 Indonesians stranded in Australia by the Pacific war. They happened to be virtually all voluntary returnees, mostly seamen from Dutch ships, members of the Netherlands East Indies armed forces, and detainees, who had been prisoners held in exile before the war in the notorious Dutch camp at Boven Digoel, north of Merauke in West Papua. But they were due to be repatriated as soon as the war ended in any case, in accordance with the requirements of the 'White Australia Policy'.