

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'.

The story of the return of these exiles, comprehensively researched and engagingly related by Frank Bennett, a former US diplomat now living in Melbourne, provides an illuminating record of how relations between the Australian, Dutch and Indonesian governments developed in those early months of Indonesia's struggle for independence. 'Australia was [then] in the process of defining a distinct foreign policy of its own', he notes, 'and the *Esperance Bay* incident was part of the evolutionary development of such a policy'. Because various issues arose, some of them quite minor ones, on which the Chifley Government found itself seriously at odds with the Dutch (and sometimes also the British, whose forces had landed in Java and Sumatra to handle the surrender of the Japanese), Australia became directly involved in making decisions about both the exiles and the new Republican government in Indonesia, which crucially influenced the course of Australian policy there from the outset. Bennett points out that the various Australians who became directly involved in negotiations with the Indonesian leaders, MacMahon Ball, Justice Richard Kirby, Tom Critchley and Alfred Brookes were favourably impressed by them, but mostly critical of the stiff-necked stubbornness and arrogance of the Dutch, who even then were trying to re-establish their former pattern of colonial rule.

Chifley and the young Acting Secretary of External Affairs, John Burton, also became increasingly unsympathetic to the Dutch and their policies, although Australia remained committed to *de jure* recognition of Dutch sovereignty. Bennett makes an interesting point that a comparison of the situation in Indonesia with that in French Indochina shows that the lack of interest in the latter by Mountbatten's forces (and, politically, by the US) enabled the French to re-establish their rule quickly, which later gave rise to the long and bitter war of liberation there. Conversely, in Indonesia the involvement of the British and Australians, and later the Americans too, made it essential for the Dutch to start negotiating with the Republic of Indonesia almost immediately. So the Australian government was thereby 'pushed into a direct relationship with the new Republic from its earliest days' by its experiences with the seamen and refugees', as well as 'the pressure to get them out of Australia'.

Perhaps we were lucky that our controversial immigration policy had such a serendipitous political outcome! Although the voyage of the *Esperance Bay* forms the major part of his book, along with the later, less controversial three voyages of HMAS *Manoora* in 1946–7, Bennett has traced very well the background to the broader story of how the Indonesians came to be in Australia between 1941–5 and what they did here after they heard about the proclamation of Indonesian independence. (Those of

us who knew of the parts played by Molly Bondan and her splendid Indonesian husband will be pleased to read of their sensible handling of some politically complex problems in their relations with the Australian authorities.) Old naval men like me will also find a lot of intriguing nuggets of interest in the very detailed story, almost too detailed at times, of the *Esperance Bay*'s unique problems of transporting an over-crowded boatload of Indonesian men, women and children whom it had promised to deliver to a port under Republican control at a time when neither the Dutch nor the British military authorities in Batavia were at all happy about receiving them anywhere.

My only (minor) complaint about this book is that not enough effort has been put into the job of transforming a good and very detailed Monash University MA thesis into a more attractively readable book. Not that the book is not readable: it is. But it is overburdened with the scholarly apparatus required for a thesis, such as references and footnotes, and it has so much detail that it could easily have been pruned drastically. Short books are generally better books. And a book and a thesis serve different purposes. A graduate student's concern to satisfy demanding examiners about a thesis should not apply to a book, since any assiduous reader can go to the thesis for further details if they are needed. Bennett says he hopes his book will help to make this remarkable story better known than it is to today's young Australians. His conclusion that 'the story of Australia's reaction to the Indonesian exiles and their campaign of resistance to the Dutch is an inspiring one' deserves our respect and appreciation. ♦

Frank C. Bennett Jr., 'The Return of the Exiles: Australia's Repatriation of the Indonesians, 1945–47', Monash Asia Institute, (Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, Number. 58), Monash University, 2003, paperback, 328pp, RRP \$59.95.

Alias Chin Peng: My Side of History

Chin Peng

Reviewed by Professor Peter Edwards

Imagine, for a moment, that Osama bin Laden were to remain alive, if not especially active, for some decades in the remote sanctuaries on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. Then (to continue the hypothetical