

The Battle History of the Royal New South Wales Regiment,

Volume I: 1885–1918 and Volume II: 1939–45

Major General Gordon L. Maitland

Reviewed by Phil Carey

More than a third of the troops Australia deployed in two World Wars were citizens of New South Wales. Their deeds went a long way towards making the Legend of Anzac from 1915 to 1918 and continued the tradition of courage, sacrifice and determination into the second of those wars from 1939 to 1945. The Royal New South Wales Regiment is a comparatively recent creation, formed as part of a major restructuring of the army in 1960, when the CMF infantry battalions in each Australian State were brought together to form State regiments. The army has experienced many re-organisations in its history and in all probability none was more traumatic than in 1960. However, a redeeming feature was the decision to carry on the honours and traditions of the old battalions of the AIF and the Militia in the 'new' state regiments.

These are Major General Gordon Maitland's third and fourth books and the two volumes chronicle the battles fought by all the infantry units from New South Wales. Some actions of Light Horse regiments are also included since these too are relevant to the 'new' RNSWR. Volume I covers the period from 1885 to 1918, including the State's commitments to the war in the Sudan, South Africa and World War I. Volume II covers the inter-war period and World War II.

All the battle, theatre and campaign honours awarded to the battalions raised in New South Wales are included as distinct chapters and, where appropriate, are prefaced by an introductory narrative fixing the events in their overall politico-strategic setting. Some readers may only be interested in the battles. They are well served. The real key to understanding is found in concise 'bridging' narratives, which tie chapters together. Especially in Volume II, these provide the political and strategic glue, which place the campaigns and battles in context and sequence. Volume II also includes sections on 'Between the Wars', 'The Second World War', 'The Japanese Thrust' and 'The Unnecessary Campaigns?'. For students in particular these bridging narratives are essential reading.

Both volumes have been written with the general

reader in mind rather than the regimental history buff and are worthy books for all generations. They will have a special value for senior secondary school students and are essential additions to school libraries. From the start the layouts are helpful to the younger reader. In Volume I there are short chapters, placed early in the book, explaining terminology, nomenclature, battle honours and army organisation, which can sometimes be confusing even to someone with military experience. Both volumes have useful glossaries, informative endnotes and comprehensive bibliographies. Unfortunately the indexes in both volumes are not as extensive as desirable but this is no reflection on the author. Places, personalities and some events are adequately listed, but students wishing to delve deeper could be disappointed. In any event the arrangement of chapters in both volumes is probably sufficient to offset the difficulty of finding the reason for some obscure decision or policy.

General Maitland's intention over both volumes is to present a narrative of events, not an analysis. But they are not passionless accounts of distant events. Neither are they trite regimental histories or collections of anecdotes. The two volumes are a very human story of Australians with all the pathos, exhilaration and sorrow that goes with war. The style is easy to read, thoroughly compelling, constant and evocative throughout, punctuated at times with necessary and apposite criticism and liberally sensitised with quotations from the soldiers themselves. Other authors, prominent historians in their own right, are tastefully quoted to bring strength and clarity: Bean of course, and few are as compassionate as Bill Gamage or as competent as Michael McKernan and John Terraine.

When it came to illustrations the author excelled himself. First-class maps, diagrams, cartoons and veritable battalions of new and old photographs from both Australian War Memorial and private collections bring the text to life, add to understanding and present an aura of outstanding quality. If this were not enough, the addition of poetry to bring out the enormity of the experience

and the emotional significance of its impact on the men and the society from which they came, cements the work in a lasting reality.

Some readers might think it a little churlish to compare or contrast the two volumes but, after reading both General Maitland's signal histories of his beloved regiment, one is struck by certain similarities as well as significant differences.

Volume I is notable for its meticulous research, clarity and an easily read style. Although it is intended to be a narrative rather than an analysis of events, it is much more than this; a carefully constructed saga. Volume II excels in the same way but there are subtle differences. The sheer scope of Australia's contribution to that war gives the second volume a larger dimension; the more immediate and dangerous threat to Australia's existence in 1942 gives it a greater urgency. The fact the author lived through the events that led up to war in 1939, was himself in the army of the time and knew many of the people who made the history of that war, gives it a much more personal touch.

Chapters in Volume I include names that became household words that stirred both the imagination and reverence of generations of Australians in the aftermath of 1918: Sari Bair-Lone Pine, Pozieres, The Somme, Bullecourt, Ypres, Menin Road, Polygon Wood, Beersheba and of course, The Landing at Anzac and Gallipoli amongst many more. A specific aim of Volume I in particular is to address the growing interest of young people in their Anzac heritage. Accordingly it will assist the young soldiers of today to understand the roles they have assumed and enable all young Australians to appreciate the sacrifices their citizen soldier forebearers made in the interests of freedom and security.

NSW Premier Bob Carr says in his excellent foreword to Volume I, 'The story of the Royal New South Wales Regiment is essentially one of what can be achieved by soldiers of all ranks who never forgot that they were, first and last, Australian citizens'. Former Governor of New South Wales, the Hon. Gordon Samuels in his own insightful foreword to Volume I notes that the author is '...an historian of great capacity who has recounted the battle history of the regiment with sensitive and accurate scholarship, taste and skill'. Both of these comments sum up the excellence of both volumes very nicely.

Volume II is the story of a second generation of citizen soldiers; those young men who enlisted in the Second AIF and their younger cousins of the Militia who, no less, rose to the same task. Following the example of their fathers and uncles of 1914-18, and often led by veterans of the old AIF, they embraced and enhanced the traditions of Anzac. This volume is a story of what Premier Carr has called 'The Greatest Generation'.

The central units and personalities of Volume II are, of course, the units and personnel of the New South Wales battalions of the Second AIF and the Militia, who fought the battles listed as its chapters. Significant mention is made of units from other States that fought beside or in concert with them, and it should be remembered that as the war proceeded needs of reinforcement meant that personnel from other States joined the NSW battalions. Theirs is essentially a human story and the author readily brings out the human factor with all its vigour, courage, compassion and tragedy, and just as importantly, its humour.

World War II operations are described with great sensitivity and the descriptive narrative is appropriately illuminated by extracts from soldiers' diaries and their first-hand accounts given to the author or recorded in their unit's publications. Honoured names like Bardia, Alamein and Tobruk, Tempe Gorge, Merjayun, Muar and Gemas, Kokoda and Wewak, Bougainville and Balikpapan, roll off the pages; and the deeds that were done there rolled into the history of the Australian people.

Commenting on the peace treaties at the end of the World War I, Marshal Foch ruefully proclaimed that it was not a peace at all, but merely a cease-fire for twenty years. How right he was! Gordon Maitland traces the period between the wars with excellent clarity and goes on to point out that Australia's generals were particularly prescient in their analyses of the strategic situation facing our nation. Whereas their political masters constantly avoided the difficult decisions inherent in devising a suitable defence policy; parsimoniously cutting the Army's funding, neglecting its equipment needs, training and administration, and effectively rendering it ill-prepared for war in 1939.

Just as prophetic was the repeated advice of Australia's senior soldiers in respect of Japanese ambitions in the Pacific. Generals Chauvel and Lavarack were prominent in warning of Japan's likelihood of attacking while Britain was preoccupied with a war in Europe. Their misgivings about the infamous Singapore strategy, though realistic, were also overridden. General Maitland assesses the impact of this folly and the consequences that our soldiers had to bear. There are clear principles and lessons here for how we should structure the strategic management of Australia's defence in the 21st century. ♦

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