

Hassett – Australian Leader: A Biography of General Sir Francis Hassett, AC, KBE, CB, DSO, LVO

John Essex-Clark

Reviewed by Chris Appleton

Hassett: Australian Leader is an insightful and sensitive depiction of Australia's most distinguished living infantryman, General Sir Francis Hassett, acclaimed by General Peter Cosgrove as one of the 'patriarchs of the modern Australian Army'. Hassett's career spanned operational service in Palestine, Gaza, Syria, New Guinea, Bougainville, Korea and Malaya – in a succession of ever-more demanding command and staff appointments. This culminated in his 1975 appointment as the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee and, following defence reorganisations, Chief of the Defence Force Staff (CDFS), the then senior appointment in the ADF.

Brigadier John Essex-Clark, himself a distinguished infantryman, starts his account of Hassett at the battle of Maryang San, acclaimed by the Official Historian as the greatest single feat of arms by the Australian Army in the Korean War. Hassett's command of an understrength 3RAR in the capture of Maryang San displayed many of the characteristics which would distinguish his service as a senior officer: inspiring leadership, personal courage, detailed planning, decentralised execution, the utmost regard for his men, and an unassuming modesty. Essex-Clark sketches Hassett's command over those five gruelling days as a study in tactical excellence with enduring observations of battle procedure, reconnaissance, deception planning, co-ordination of all arms, dealing with friction, and the rapid exploitation of fleeting opportunities through regrouping and quick orders. The author's own extensive combat experience shines through in this book, nowhere more clearly than in a section describing how and why men fight. His assessment of aspects of the conduct of some of the British commanding officers at Maryang San is also unrelenting.

The sequence returns to a conventional chronology following the account of Maryang San. Essex-Clark writes with an easy, readable style largely devoid of acronyms. The book tends to overuse group headings within chapters, perhaps arising from the author's desire to package information neatly for the student of warfare who scans rather than reads for inspiration. The concluding two chapters are unconventional in a military biography. The former focuses on the life and contribution of Lady Hallie Hassett, and records and recognises her unfailingly determined and loyal contribution to her husband's successful military career. The latter is perhaps less useful with some important insights on Hassett's career reflections diluted by incidental information on his current activities and general views.

Ever the instructor, Essex-Clark duly notes insights and lessons concerning Hassett's leadership, character, judgement and essential humanity. He also notes the effects of chance, such as when Hassett, the boy from Marrickville who lacked the education required and missed the closing

date for the RMC Selection Board, was perceptively given a chance to enter the college by the Commandant of the day, J.D. Lavarack.

Of the many complex characters with whom Hassett served, the author is mostly sensitive. Of H.C.H Robertson ('Red Robbie'), Hassett proffers the telling lesson, 'never to make a boastful remark'. The vindictiveness of Hassett's first AIF commanding officer in denying him pre-deployment leave with his family is an especially telling depiction of the Militia – Staff Corps tension of old, which most serving today find difficult to comprehend.

Nowadays Hassett's reputation is most frequently associated with Maryang San. Essex-Clark is convincing in his assessment that Hassett's command of 28th Commonwealth Brigade in Malaya was more substantial. He cites a range of achievements including the conduct of counter insurgency operations in Malaya, preparation for the brigade's SEATO role in Laos, exercising in Thailand, the study and reconnaissance of Vietnam; developing counter-insurgency doctrine, arguing and eventually winning the case for the Army's new Tropical Warfare establishments and the conduct of realistic training – even to the extent of constructing a Viet Minh-style fortified village within the brigade's camp. This multinational formation command laid an invaluable foundation for Hassett's series of more senior appointments as the Army's involvement in Vietnam grew.

Although admiring in character the book unflinchingly addresses Hassett's personal battles, including his lifelong struggle with the ill health which eventually forced his retirement, the impact of his son's death and his late-onset Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Using these hitherto private issues Essex-Clark reminds the reader of the essential humanity of his subject, and of his rare charm, modesty, sensitivity and inner reserve. Matters apparently lost on those cited in the book who described Hassett as an imperious or aloof senior officer.

The latter chapters covering Hassett's service as a general officer could be expanded into a separate book, so significant was his contribution to the modern Army and integrated joint-Service arrangements. A fuller story in this regard clearly needs telling but would require access to official sources not available to the author. That said, Hassett's successors, who now exercise real command of the whole defence force must be grateful they did not have to face Hassett's challenges as the inaugural and heavily circumscribed CDFS.

Professional officers, military and civilian, junior and senior, will draw much of value from this biography of a fine man, warrior chief, and remarkable servant of the nation. ♦

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