

A Great Feat of Australian Arms: National Memory, Command and Papua and New Guinea



Kokoda

Paul Ham

Kokoda Commander: A Life of Major General 'Tubby' Allen

Stuart Braga

On Shaggy Ridge: The Australian Seventh Division in the Ramu Valley: From Kaiapit to the Finisterres

Phillip Bradley

Review essay by Dr Malcolm Kennedy

The present frequently mimics the past. The three books reviewed here describe important historical events, but they also mirror crucial problems in the war in Papua and New Guinea, which continue to bedevil the Australian Defence Force today.

The authors, Ham, Braga and Bradley, all posit strong views on the importance of the historic memory of Australia's involvement in these crucial military campaigns and stress the unnecessary degree of sacrifice that was made.

The five fundamental lessons for today include the utterly inadequate government efforts to prepare Australia's troops for combat. They stress how the resilience and bravery of our troops were consumed in battle because of a slow and niggardly build up of the equipment and materiel needed to give victory. The authors give blunt accounts of how poor political–military relationships prolonged the PNG war and caused far higher casualties than necessary. They demonstrate how the lack of knowledge and fixed mindsets blinkered strategic thinking and the conduct of operations; and how the vanity, of the remote commanders, Blamey and MacArthur, was unfairly exercised in their envious and deadly treatment of several successful field commanders. The repeated gainsaying of the skilled field-commanders and the rejection of their expert advice needlessly cost lives.

These books glory in the heroic spirit of mateship, which characterises the officers and men who fought in PNG, but this is tempered by being confronted by the base and petty behaviour of those who so many believed worthy of loyalty and respect. One is repeatedly reminded of the ancient Greek warning of the inescapable nature of hubris in human affairs.

It is foolish to try to compress different events in different times into a simple parcel for the purpose of comparison. In recent years, there has emerged a lively

debate about the importance of various Australian episodes in war.

Gallipoli has become the focus of memorial pilgrimages by thousands of Australians each year. Visitors to the battlefields in France, so moved by the record of loss, failure, success and triumph of the men of the First AIF, demand greater recognition given the efforts of our troops who fought there.

The vital Australian contributions at Tobruk and Alamein also bid for recognition as singular feats of human and military skill. Each of these campaigns has its magnificent share of heroism and valour; and tragically, considerable loss of life. Passionate calls to the government and the media demand the nation be made more aware of the vital role Australians played in first halting and turning around the long victorious Japanese forces on the Kokoda Track. The savage battles won by Australians at Milne Bay, Gona, Buna and Sanananda are also exceptional efforts that deserve public recognition.

The difficulty in trying to identify the most heroic, important or crucial battle or campaign is that differences in time and place negate the basis for comparison. The current debate focuses on land battles, but there is justification to seek recognition for our naval and air units in significant actions. The naval units in the Coral Sea battle and the enormous contribution of Australian aircrews against Germany both merit celebration.

The public's search for the nation's military history, so clearly demonstrated by the increasing numbers attending ANZAC Day services and in the larger numbers trekking to Gallipoli, France and PNG, can be satisfied in the fine scholarly writing of Ham, Braga and Bradley. These authors have gone to great personal and financial lengths, to become the masters of the histories they relate; and have produced narrative history at its best. If young Australians were to

have better access to historical writing of the quality reviewed here, the teaching of history in our schools and universities would boom.

Paul Ham's *Kokoda* is much more, and somewhat less, than the title suggests. In a journalistic style, he sweeps across the whole of the 1942–43 Papua campaign. He draws extensively on Australian archival material and the extensive recent work by historians. This is supplemented by Japanese documents and interviews of the tiny handful of Japanese survivors. Given the huge scope of the topic, he has divided the book into five parts, which cover the preparation of Japanese and Australian forces, their movement into the theatre, and the subsequent phases of the war in Papua until the Japanese forces were finally destroyed in detail.

Ham's style has strength in that he provides vivid and powerful snapshots, which provide sharp and dramatic pictures of crucial features of the campaign. Some of his story has charm, but most confronts the reader through Ham's intimate descriptions of select players and features of the brutal, harsh and tragic nature of the war. He highlights the local people pressed into service as carriers, officers and men of the American, Australian and Japanese forces, physical conditions, the nature and outcomes of battles, the clashes between commanders, the desperate plight of the sick, wounded and exhausted, the role of malaria, the impact of more powerful weapons and the vital importance of human pluck and endurance.

The snapshot approach has its weaknesses. The fifty-seven chapters that make up the book often treat very complex issues too briefly, and with a tendency to rush to judgement. Good maps, numerous illustrations, a good bibliography and a useable index support the text. A lack of consistency in the use of military terms and the faulty description of weapons and equipment will irritate some readers. Ham's potboiler intensity leaves no bad anecdote untold, but often ignores the full explanation of context, circumstance and actual limitations on people and resources.

This book is a racy good read and the material drawn from the Japanese sources and interviews is of great interest and provides sober insights into our versions of events. It has a role to excite interest in the war but it does not match the scholarly depth and masterful treatment given in Peter Brune's *A Bastard of a Place*, so ably reviewed by Peter Ryan in the Autumn 2004 *Defender*. Nonetheless, Ham has written a useful introduction, which should excite public interest in the great issues and events of this period.

Stuart Braga and Phillip Bradley have laboured long to produce excellent additions to the very high quality Army History Series. Handsomely produced volumes, they include excellent maps, illustrations, notes, an extensive bibliography and index.

The sober historical style adopted in these volumes is in contrast to that of Paul Ham; however, this makes them more compelling and convincing. The authors have spent many years in painstaking research, exploration of the terrain, mastering the secondary sources and collecting and digesting a huge range of primary source materials. Their

texts and notes reveal that they are deft users of this material, having immersed themselves in this corpus of hard data they are sure in their own judgements and defer to no fashionable views or assertions. The crisp narratives penned by Braga and Bradley carry the reader along through stories that range from delight in human triumph to the horror of violent death.

Braga has painstakingly built a thorough and highly nuanced study of a remarkable soldier, leader and man. He opens his study of Arthur 'Tubby' Allen with the challenge that he is not just writing military history, but '... also a book about the abuse of power'. In a highly readable and scholarly manner, he does even more.

Allen was the quintessential product of an Australian society that sought to foster betterment in its children. Born in 1894, Allen came from a working-class background, but one, which imbued a powerful drive to achieve in all possible fields of endeavour. Allen, a keen sportsman, was committed to self-improvement and put hours of reading aloud into overcoming a stammer. Studying accountancy after hours, he still found time to serve in the Senior Cadets after they began in 1911. Aged nineteen he joined the CMF, passed his officer training course in 1913, and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the 38th Battalion. He had to wait until June 1915 when turning 21 he took his commission in the 13th Battalion of the first AIF and in August 1915 sailed 'for service abroad'.

Allen's military career was a considerable success, by 1918 he was a lieutenant-colonel and as Braga notes Allen '... had proved to be a fearless and capable leader in battle. ... He was firm, blunt, and direct in his dealings with superiors and subordinates, all of whom liked him and had a great respect for him as a man and a soldier.' A leader who '... adapts himself to new ideas'.

Allen was promoted to Brigadier and command of the 14th Brigade in 1938, but quickly enlisted in the AIF. He commanded the 16th Brigade in outstanding victories at Bardia and Tobruk, played a key role in preventing the German capture of the ANZAC Corps in Greece and commanded the 7th Division in the short and bloody Syrian campaign. During 1941, he had fought three enemies, on three continents in less than six months and yet by the end of 1942 his career was in tatters. What had happened to this gifted and accomplished leader?

In the hot-house environment of higher political–military control of the South West Pacific war ruthless struggles for prestige and power put even successful field commanders' careers and reputations at risk. Although Brigadier Potts had skilfully conducted a fighting withdrawal, perhaps the most difficult of all operations, back across the Kokoda Track under the most difficult tactical, logistic and topographic circumstances he was summarily sacked and Allen was thrown into the task of pushing the Japanese back to the northern beaches.

Allen conducted the campaign with great skill, even though he had to struggle for every scrap of material to conduct the fight. On the brink of success and the recapture of Kokoda, he was relieved of his command and never again

held an active field command. Allen had his great strengths and his obvious faults, however, as Stuart Braga demonstrates in this unvarnished account of the man, Allen rightfully deserves his reputation as one of Australia's best combat commanders.

Phillip Bradley's book is one of the best unit campaign histories I have had the pain and pleasure of reading. In the opening pages of this book, the reader is given a taste of the real tragedy of war. In the most frustrating form of senseless wartime loss, a company of Australian troops, fully equipped and loaded down with ammunition is waiting in their trucks to be emplaned and flown from Port Moresby to the Ramu campaign. They are capriciously killed, wounded and scarred, when a Liberator on take-off clipped a tree and crashed. In seconds, from one company of the 2/33 Battalion, 15 men were dead, a further 45 died from burns and 92 soldiers were left hideously wounded.

In this fine history, Bradley takes the reader into the war after the Japanese have been defeated in Papua but still control most of New Guinea. The overall tempo of the Pacific war has accelerated in terms of the machines and materials. The Australian and American forces in the area have won significant victories and now draw upon seasoned, well-trained and well-equipped units. The allied troops had considerable advantages with the ready supply of tanks, artillery, aerial transport, bomber and fighter support, more effective logistics and far greater expertise in preventative medical care and casualty evacuation.

Bradley brilliantly captures the apparent changed nature of the war, when he notes that on 4 September 1943, the Australian Ninth Division had made the first Australian amphibious landing since Gallipoli near Lae and the next day MacArthur gave the Japanese a display of Allied military power.

The attack on Nadzab began with six squadrons of B-25 Mitchells, which strafed and bombed the landing zone; followed by six Bostons laying smoke, then 96 C-47 Dakotas carried the US 503rd Parachute Regiment and two 25-pounder guns from the Australian 2/4th Field Regiment. Three groups of fighters screened the transports and five B-17s dropped supplies. Nearby 28 bombers struck Japanese positions.

This massive aerial attack was in stark contrast to the nature of the land combat and the eventual battle for Shaggy Ridge. In the push out from Nadzab, the Markham-Ramu Valley offered the Allied commander's opportunities to open new airfields, which would let them, use airpower to attack the large Japanese bases north-west at Madang, Wewak and Hollandia.

Bradley describes the long and difficult fighting against the Japanese, who used every possible trick, ploy, and tactic. In contrast to the Kokoda campaign, allied aircraft were quickly brought in, as airfields were captured or built, to replenish supplies and carry out the wounded.

A savage corrective to the mobile form of warfare that had been employed on the advance to Shaggy Ridge slammed into place. The terrain, or the beast of the ridge, as Bradley calls it, once again dictated tactics and the use

of weapons. So precipitous and narrow was the feature that attacks often had to be made on a front measured in feet and much of the battle was carried by hand-to-hand fighting. Nonetheless, aircraft and artillery were used in clever ways to help dislodge and defeat the Japanese.

Bradley's detailed and gripping account of the battle is supported by excellent photographs, which give the reader a fuller grasp of the incredible geographic conditions faced by the Australians. His acute word pictures carry the account through to January 1944 when the Japanese had been driven from Shaggy Ridge and Crater Hill. Although there was still extensive fighting, this was the beginning of the end for the Japanese war effort in New Guinea.

The three authors provide us with ample evidence to insist that the Kokoda, Milne Bay and New Guinea campaigns merit public reverence and recognition similar to that of Gallipoli. The overall contribution of the Australian forces was far more than to be the first to halt the Japanese Imperial forces' sweeping advance across the Asia-Pacific region, it was the first time they were defeated in detail and these victories can rightfully be claimed as a turning point of the war.

These books should inspire all Australians to demand that the defence force ought not have suffered the ignorance, incompetence and poor support, or the senior political and military leadership abuse recorded here. Unfortunately, the ADF still answers to a parliament in which few members consider defence the most important duty of government and fewer still seek to learn and objectively apply the lessons of military history. The defence force also remains shackled with unclear whole-of-government strategic assessment and command arrangements, and a Department of Defence bureaucracy that continually interferes with the effective practise of command, at the strategic and operational levels, in both peace and war. Unless these situations are reformed we risk repeating the debacles of 1941-43.

For the 200,000 Japanese who fought in the campaign, Papua and New Guinea was worse than Gallipoli, since ninety-five per cent died there. In inflicting that great defeat thousands of Australian troops were brutally used and hundreds destroyed by a senior leadership, which seemed almost constantly deaf to accurate reports of the reality of the war in the field. These readings excite both great admiration for our men's valour, but also quiet fury that there is no record of shame from those who so badly wasted their lives. To paraphrase the words of a bard—'where ignorance was bliss it was a folly to be wise'. ♦

Paul Ham, 'Kokoda', HarperCollins, Sydney, 2004, Casebound and jacketed, 602pp., RRP \$45.00.

Stuart Braga, 'Kokoda Commander A Life of Major-General 'Tubby' Allen', Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2004, Casebound and jacketed, 374pp., RRP \$59.95.

Phillip Bradley, 'On Shaggy Ridge The Australian Seventh Division in the Ramu Valley: From Kaiapit to the Finisterres', Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2004, Casebound and jacketed, 284pp., RRP \$55.00.