

The Strength of a Nation

Michael McKernan

Reviewed by: Jack McCaffrie

The Strength of a Nation, Michael McKernan's latest Australian military history, covers World War II and complements his 1983 book *All In*. This latest book is really about four groups of people; Australia's political and military leaders, their troops, and the men and women who worked on the home front.

Australia's main wartime Prime Ministers, Menzies and Curtin, appear as sharply contrasting characters. McKernan is very critical of Menzies and his preference for London over Melbourne or Canberra, early in the war. He suggests that Menzies was not the man for the time – not that time anyway. Curtin, however, comes across as someone whom the Australian people implicitly trusted. For example, thousands of Australians wrote to him, either offering encouragement or seeking help with personal matters. But, McKernan is critical of Curtin's leadership too, specifically for taking matters so personally that he suffered great stress. This contributed to his death, described in the final chapter entitled 'A war casualty if ever there was one'.

McKernan's assessment of Australia's wartime military leadership is similarly equivocal. Many senior officers are criticised – Blamey severely. Blamey's personal conduct and his inappropriate address to the troops after the Kokoda fighting, receive special mention. But the writer is most scathing of the apparently dysfunctional RAAF leadership in the last four years of the war. McKernan condemns the pettiness of Air Vice Marshals Jones and Bostock and the impact their behaviour had on Air Force operations. He is also careful to distinguish this from the bravery and dedication of RAAF aircrew.

There were good leaders too, although McKernan identifies few at the higher levels, beyond Generals Morshead and Mackay, both of whom already had enviable reputations from their World War I service. Fine leadership seems to have been more abundant at brigade or battalion level and it emerges clearly in the courage and competence of officers like Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Honner, Brigadier Arnold Potts and others. McKernan also makes much of the inspirational leadership of ships' captains like Hec Waller and Harry Howden and of the amazing determination, persistence and courage of pilots such as Hughie Edwards and Bill Newton.

Understandably, McKernan is full of praise for the troops. And while it might be unfair to single out a few from the many thousands who served, there were some quite exceptional characters. These include Les Bolger who felt let down by his officers in Singapore, suffered in Changi and on the Burma-Thailand railway and was eventually rescued from a torpedoed Japanese ship. There was also the remarkable Tom 'Diver' Derrick, whose exploits in North Africa and in the South Pacific were quite extraordinary and led, perhaps inevitably to his eventual death. Neither should we forget the

unsung Teddy Sheean and HMAS *Armidale*.

The experiences of two other 'ordinary' people allow McKernan to expose the utter tragedy and futility of war; which he does to great effect throughout the book. Bill Todd was a merchant navy officer in the MV *Hauraki*, which was captured by Japanese forces in the Indian Ocean in July 1942. Todd, as a prisoner-of-war, subsequently broadcast on shortwave in 1943 and was heard by his family. Their sense of relief was matched by the expectation of eventual reunion. Sadly, Todd died in captivity some months later, something the family discovered only after the war. Albert Moore was a Salvation Army Chaplain who looked after the troops in North Africa and on the Kokoda Track. His selflessness and determination to provide comfort for the troops made him a legend. He is also responsible for the most moving passage in the book – his diary entry recording the parting from his wife and young son. This is what war does and McKernan records it brilliantly.

On the home front, McKernan recounts Curtin's determination that everyone had a part to play and the rigid overbearing methods that were applied to achieve this. People were told where they would work and of course food and clothing rationing were introduced. Still, despite these efforts, many of those returning from the war thought that life was too easy at home. An indication of what 'all in' meant, however, comes in McKernan's description of an unnamed Melbourne lady whose husband was at war. She left home at 5.30am and worked all day peeling onions before returning home at 7.30pm, to look after her children. There were many like her. We also read of young Beryl Bedggood's war and how it changed her life – and there is a fascinating twist to it.

This book is just full of fascinating stories of and insights into Australia's Second World War. It is a great read and this brief review cannot do it justice. My one criticism is that sailors and airmen are not really given enough exposure – no mention of the Coastwatchers for example. McKernan acknowledges this shortcoming, at least in the case of the Navy, and perhaps there will be another book? At a time when the ADF has great difficulty in attracting people to serve, this book tells us why an earlier generation did serve and what it meant to do so. ♦

Michael McKernan, *The Strength of A Nation: Six years of Australians Fighting for the Nation and Defending the Homefront in WWII*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest NSW, 2006, Casebound and jacketed, 416pp., RRP \$49.95.

