

Paul Cullen, Citizen and Soldier: The Life and Times of Major General Paul Cullen, AC, CBE, DSO*, ED

Kevin Baker

Reviewed by Neil James

General Paul Cullen was 96 last February and is one of only two or three surviving World War II combatant battalion commanders. He later commanded the 14th Infantry Brigade in the CMF and was deputy commander of the 1st Division during the ill-fated Pentropic experiment of the early 1960s. After promotion to major general he was commander of Communications Zone Forces and CMF member of the Military Board. As founder of the CMF Association (now the Defence Reserves Association), and thorn in the side for five decades to numerous politicians, bureaucrats and not least Chiefs of General Staff and then Army, Cullen has finally been brought to literary account by Kevin Baker.

Baker's book is more assisted memoir than comprehensive biography but he has at least avoided the pitfalls of hagiography or concocted controversy. His account of Cullen's long and eventful life concentrates, naturally enough, on the military aspects and skims over much of the private man, but it remains an enjoyable and informative read.

Even in a book that, by conception, design or execution, falls short of the full biography its subject deserves, the reader comes away with a good understanding of a life of service worthy of the highest respect.

In March 1927 Cullen was in the last call up of 18-year olds for the inter-war national service scheme. He enjoyed it so much he immediately joined the militia, and served continuously in the militia, second AIF and CMF until his compulsory retirement, at age 57 for major generals, in February 1966.

As things went in the early World War II era, his expertise as a garrison artillery battery commander in the militia led to his rejection by the field gunners of the 2/1st Field Regiment but earned him appointment as an infantry company commander with the 2/2nd Battalion, 16th Brigade. He sailed for the Middle East in January 1940 and subsequently saw action at Bardia, (first) Tobruk, and then as battalion second-in-command in the doomed campaign in Greece. After successfully evading capture and leading a large party of escapees to Crete he was commander of a composite battalion defending that island from the world's first airborne invasion. In June 1942 he assumed command of the 2/1st Battalion, and from September that year led them on the Kokoda Track and then to Sanananda in 1943. In 1945 he commanded the 2/1st in its fifth campaign of the war at Nambut Ridge during the advance to liberate Aitape and Wewak. From June 1945 he was acting commander of the 16th Brigade in New Guinea.

After the war Cullen, ever an innovative thinker in any field of endeavour, formed the CMF's first OCTU, with authority if not, at first, with official authorisation, by re-tasking his brigade headquarters defence platoon. He later successfully proposed the formation of "bushman's rifles" special

conditions CMF units, and was instrumental in approval of the professional program to rotate 500 CMF officers through South Vietnam on 16-day operational attachments.

But Paul Cullen has three other sides, each not widely known to many who meet him during the conduct of each one. He worked for the relief of Jewish refugees pre and post-war and later was the founder (and for many years chairman or CEO) of AUSTCARE one of

Australia's oldest international refugee agencies. He has given longstanding leadership service to numerous charities, including the Royal Blind Society in NSW, the Australian National Council of and for the Blind, the Australian Council for Overseas Aid and the Australian Refugee Council. Cullen was also an innovative businessman in several fields, enjoying various ups and downs. He helped form Australia's first unit trust in the 1930s and founded Festival Records, our first merchant bank, and first supermarket in the 1950s. He was also a pioneer of agricultural development in the Northern Territory.

On his final side, Cullen has championed the cause of the reservist soldier, and the associated concept of "twice a citizen", for six decades. His retirement from active reserve status in 1966 gave him the time to form the CMF Association in 1970, as the first of the representative groups now needed to protect the interests of serving members of the ADF in a political climate often detached from informed debate on national security issues. However, Cullen's ability to lobby politicians, and on occasion to provide advice at variance with the desires of many but not all Army Chiefs, was always well meant but not always conducive to eliminating the two-army tribal exceptionalism nurtured by too many on both sides of the regular versus reserve debate. Full integration of the Army's full-time and part-time capabilities was always inevitable as the needs of force modernisation, changes in Australian society and evolving contemporary warfare, destroyed forever the 3rd AIF model on which the CMF and early Army Reserve force structure and culture was based.

General Paul Cullen remains a staunch and much respected member of the Defence Reserves Association (and indeed the ADA) and still speaks with clarity, authority and even a degree of resigned humour at its annual conference. His sight may now be dimmed but his spirit and intellect still burn with the desire to protect his beloved Army Reserve and his cherished Army. Young ADF personnel of today, both regular and reservist, owe this man a great deal — exasperating though his persistence can be at times. ♦

Kevin Baker, *'Paul Cullen: Citizen and Soldier'*, Rosenberg, Dural NSW, 2005, Softback, 224pp., RRP \$29.50.

