

Nemesis: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45

Max Hastings

Reviewed by Dr Peter Stanley

Max Hastings, intrepid British Falklands war correspondent (first into Port Stanley, ahead of the paratroopers), has become an accomplished military historian. *Nemesis*, his version of the final year of the war against Japan, complements his earlier *Armageddon*, explaining the fall of Nazi Germany.

Hastings has the born historian's gift for conveying insightful judgements with strong individual stories, and its worth reading *Nemesis* for both. It is impressively even-handed. He tells his story from the perspective of the Chinese and Japanese as much as the Americans or British.

His accounts of Iwo Jima and Burma, the bombing of Japan and kamikaze defence are especially powerful. He evokes the war of US marines and sailors, British soldiers and Gurkhas with skill. He writes sympathetically of Chinese guerrillas and Japanese suicide pilots, often overlooked or stereotyped.

If you read just one book about how awful the Pacific war was, *Nemesis* should be the one. It is a superb new account, except for one chapter. That exception is chapter 14: *Australians: Bludging and Mopping Up*. Harper Press publicists placed extracts from this chapter in various newspapers. A flurry of letters understandably accused Hastings of insulting dead comrades and of demeaning Australia's contribution to the war.

Was this an overreaction? What is so bad about chapter 14? Unlike other chapters, it is based on a few, mostly older books, a handful of primary sources and no interviews. Elsewhere he presents individuals who embody his broader themes, Allied and Japanese. In the Australian chapter, Hastings relies on generalisations and quotes snippets from a handful of men, not even giving their full names.

He has done a cursory chapter on the cheap. He did not visit Australia to consult sources, veterans or historians. It is not just that he makes obvious mistakes: he misplaces, for example, an entire division of what he miscalls the Australian Expeditionary Force. The problem is that he just does not know enough to explain Australia's war in the Pacific theatre.

He has not used either the available evidence or the work of experts as he has for America, Britain, China and Japan. For example, he claims that wharfies harmed Australia's war effort, by refusing to unload cargoes. It is a common allegation. Those who have examined waterside unions (dominated by communists and red-hot to win the war by the time Japan entered it) have found the claim mainly unjustified.

Likewise, Hastings makes a meal of 'mutinies' by militia troops in Bougainville (specialists would call it combat refusal). Again, the experts Hastings did not talk to or quote have made more sense of the subject and the circumstances than him.

In fact, these men anticipated his argument that peripheral campaigns cost lives without bringing victory closer. These men were not 'bludgers': they had enlisted to fight the Japanese but they knew that dying in Bougainville was pointless. Elsewhere, Hastings explains that '*in the circumstances then prevailing*' (his italics) the horrendous Pacific battles after mid-1944 were unnecessary, unproductive, and tragically unavoidable. Ignorant of the 'circumstances then prevailing' in Australia, he fails to understand it's war, and withholds a sympathy he applies liberally elsewhere.

Coincidentally, I am writing this review in the pub at Terowie, the former railway town in South Australia's mid-north. The biggest moment in Terowie's history came in March 1942 when General Douglas MacArthur, freshly escaped from the Philippines, told reporters on the platform here: 'I shall return'. A plaque marks the spot.

MacArthur's vow partly explains Australia's limited contribution to the wider war from mid 1944. His obsession with the Philippines led him to limit the role of Australian forces, especially the Army. John Curtin meekly accepted his orders. But in the last major campaign of the war an Australian corps did liberate Borneo in May-July 1945 (though not for its oil; Hastings gets that wrong too). Hastings seems not to grasp the importance of the commitment.

As well as re-occupying it's possessions and liberating it's trust-territories in Papua New Guinea, Australia's used its two best divisions to free Borneo from a cruel Japanese occupation. Indonesians and Malaysians once recalled this gratefully. This was invasion and liberation, not merely 'mopping up'.

MacArthur's egotism and Curtin's supine caution made Australia's war effort dysfunctional. But in 1945 it still had six divisions in action, from Borneo to Bougainville. RAAF squadrons and RAN ships were even more widely spread across the Pacific supporting Allied operations elsewhere. Australia's largest operation, Balikpapan, began after British and American forces finished their fighting. Australia's campaigns did not defeat Japan itself: but what did? Hastings admits that Burma, Iwo Jima and Okinawa were pointless sacrifices.

Had the invasion of Japan proceeded — all right, he thinks that unlikely — an Australian division would have fought on Kyushu. While it withdrew unduly from the European war, Australia took as full a part in the Pacific war as Allied and Australian leaders allowed. No Australian alive today could have altered that fact. Australia's war did end in 'rancour and anticlimax', but it is a pity that in this otherwise outstanding revisionist account Hastings has lent his deserved authority to fomenting a superficial view of it. ♦

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