

Backs to the Wall: A Larrikin on the Western Front

G.D. Mitchell

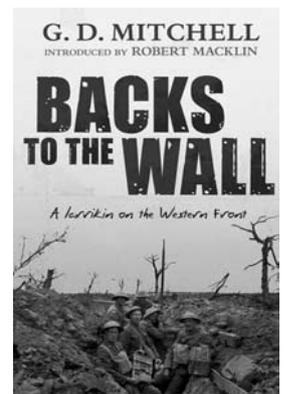
Reviewed by Dr Michael Tyquin

Backs to the Wall, based on George Mitchell's World War I diaries, originally appeared in 1937 but apparently sank without making much of an impression. It has been resurrected by Robert Macklin, biographer of Albert Jacka VC, who provides the introduction and afterword to this work. Macklin's claim that Mitchell, a Military Cross winner, 'kept one of the most remarkable diaries in military history' is overstating things, but there is no doubt it is a wonderful example of the genre as an Australian perspective on that war.

Curiously, given Macklin's meticulous research of Jacka, a contemporary of Mitchell, little is revealed of the latter's early years, family or formative influences. A 16-page but very sketchy forward gives the barest outline of the man's earlier life and character. The reader is instead led straight to the opening of Mitchell's original book, with his departure from Australia in 1914. Macklin's contribution ends with an afterword which outlines Mitchell's fascinating World War II exploits in and around New Guinea as CO of No. 43 Landing Craft Company. The man himself also published two other books, was a regular contributor to soldiers' newspapers and journals and successfully stood for State Parliament in New South Wales.

Mitchell's book begins in 1916 with a brief reference to having been invalided from Gallipoli in October the previous year. His prose is matter of fact but elegantly written with a poetic turn of phrase. He refers in one place to a massed artillery bombardment as 'a debauchery of sound.' The diary extracts are seamlessly blended with the larger narrative as a means to highlight a point or to let his experiences recorded at the time speak for themselves – without reflection or self censorship. Despite the bloodshed and horrors there is nothing maudlin about the author's work. Each scene, rather than becoming part of a repetitive theme, is painted afresh from a lively angle which brings to life what otherwise might have become banal in the telling.

With luck and cunning on his side he is awarded a DCM at Bullecourt for some very cool work with a Lewis Gun and later, near Amiens, a Military Cross for single-handedly capturing 31 Germans. From 1916 to 1918 he chronicles his sometimes tenuous hold on sanity as he and his mates are subjected to relentless artillery barrages, death and boredom, together with his own personal demon – being buried alive. *Backs to the Wall* is full of both black humour and wit as Mitchell keeps one step ahead of his superiors while fighting an ongoing battle to be accepted into the Royal Flying Corps. He has a beautiful sense of scene, as in this one on the Somme: 'The dags were there, the wild men, the conscientious soldiers, the lean hungry ones and odd nerve-racked men who soldiered on in spite of themselves.'



Liberally peppered with the mild expletives born of battlefield frustration and fatigue, the book also includes metaphors lost on many today: 'trapped like flies on a paper.'

Macklin is extremely economic in his use of notes either to expand on personalities, specific battles, or to explain slang or technical terms, such as 'five one nines', 'Toc Emmas', 'Bradburys' and so on. While Macklin has resited the urge to swamp his subject's narrative, this reviewer felt that explanations, particularly for the non-military reader, are sparse indeed.

In one episode at the front Mitchell describes his one and only war-time meeting with Captain Jacka VC. While he could write insightful paragraphs about girls he spent only a few hours with, or mates or passers by, his only observation on this Aussie icon was that he was 'coldly efficient.' He describes an encounter with his opposite number – a German junior officer – during an unofficial two-hour Armistice on his patch of the front in May 1918 near Monument Wood. By that year he and his men experienced many 'anxious days'. However the Anzac men who were still alive were relieved that there was 'none of the slimy horror of the winter of 1916-1917, nor the fever and starvation of Gallipoli.'

There is throughout the book a sense of expectancy and excitement, even about the most mundane aspects of life at the front. For Mitchell gives a louse's eye view of the war with little reference to generals (apart from unabashed admiration for Monash), grand strategy or even major tactics. He writes about survival and is genuinely and constantly aggrieved that he never receives a 'Blighty' wound that would remove him from his nightmare. Repeated applications to join the Flying Corps were rejected or frustrated by superiors too canny to throw away such a skilled fighter. Success of a kind comes in 1918 when he received both a summons to join the Corps and the chance to take '1914 Leave' to return home for six weeks. But his conundrum was solved almost immediately with the Armistice. 'There was little cheering. Our known world had slipped from us.'

Mitchell certainly has the stamp of the text book hero, but there is much of the cheeky, irreverent larrikin about him which sets him apart perhaps from other, better known heroes such as Jacka. ♦

George Dean Mitchell (with commentary by Robert Macklin), 'Backs to the Wall: A Larrikin on the Western Front', Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2007. Softback, 341pp. with endnotes and index, RRP A\$29.95.