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I Confess: a memoir of the siege of Tobruk

John Joseph Murray
Big Sky Publishing: Newport NSW, 2011
ISBN: 978-0-9870-5748-8

Reviewed by John Donovan

Major General John Murray, DCO and Bar, MC, VD, drafted this memoir in 1945 while he was General Officer Commanding Northern Territory Force. He had intended to publish it himself but his early death at the age of 59 (in 1951) denied him the opportunity. His family have now arranged for it to be published, before the passage of time and the deaths of his siblings and children lead to his papers being scattered among grand-children and great grand-children, and lost to wider community access.

The memoir does not focus on the battles in which Murray took part. Rather, it gives an account of his personal life as commander of the 20th Brigade of the 9th Division before and during the siege of Tobruk, with the battles as a backdrop. Many anecdotes show Murray’s companions in a humorous light. His writing style is easy to read, with some memorable phrases, such as a reference to the Army’s troubles with ‘women who become professional camp followers for pecuniary gain’. Delicately phrased but very informative!

His first batman (one Jack Murray, not related) seems to have been the kind of ‘character’ that might best be played by a younger Paul Hogan, who helped himself to the Brigadier’s alcohol stocks, in one case leaving a promissory note for a bottle of gin ‘borrowed’ when Jack was despatched back to his unit after getting drunk (on another bottle of the Brigadier’s gin), when he should have been digging a shelter in the desert. Not long after, Jack reappeared at brigade headquarters (minus the ‘borrowed’ gin but still promising to replace both bottles), as the brigade major’s batman.

Signallers were often considered to be good sources of the ‘dinkum oil’ on future events, but when Murray had his hair cut, the 20th Brigade headquarter’s barber was primed to ask whether he wanted a full cut or just a trim. The former was considered a sign that relief was not imminent. As the actual time for relief came near, the barber asked the question but provided a trim without waiting for an answer—perhaps the signallers had restored their position as the leading distributors of ‘furphies’!

While much of this memoir is fairly light-hearted, Murray is always conscious of the harsh background of war. He pays frequent tribute to the front-line soldiers, who faced the greatest dangers, and whose living conditions in Tobruk were considerably less comfortable than even the spartan conditions experienced by Murray.

Murray’s grandson, Andrew Murray, who prepared the draft for publication, has added an interesting selection of photographs, some well-known but many that will be new to readers. He has also added several original documents, and some notes of speeches on leadership and
the duties of staff officers that Murray gave while commanding the 4th Division and Northern Territory Force respectively. Even after almost 70 years, the speeches remain cogent.

One matter shows what a tight community Australia was in that era. Murray’s driver in Tobruk was the son of A.B. (Banjo) Paterson; two of his poems are reproduced in the book and have a style recognisably inherited from Banjo. The record of military service by members of Murray’s family in two world wars is also a reminder of the impact of those wars on Australia, when the population was much lower than it is now.

Big Sky Publishing has turned Murray’s memoir into a handsome book, well worth reading.

The Architect of Kokoda, Bert Kienzle – the man who made the Kokoda Trail

Robyn Kienzle
Hachette Australia: Sydney, 2011
ISBN: 978-0-7336-2763-7

Reviewed by Jim Truscott

This book was an eye-opener to me, despite having patrolled and trekked through much mountainous jungle. It came as some surprise to read that the Kokoda Trail was officially opened in 1905 to service the goldfields, as an alternative to coming in from Buna. The Kokoda area experienced a gold rush from 1905 until 1910, however, it was Bert Kienzle, a civilian of many talents including rubber planter and gold miner, who later etched its place in Australia’s and PNG’s military history.

The author, his granddaughter, states that the book is a biography and not a military history. But I disagree, as his story fills a critical gap in widespread knowledge about the first decisive strategic land victory in the Pacific War. While only Chapter 6 of this social history of the colonisation of PNG is devoted to war, no-one did more to ensure Australian victory than Lieutenant Bert Kienzle, in one of the costliest victories in the Pacific, where there was one death for every 11 soldiers in battle. The campaign was not just the initial fighting withdrawal and tactical victory, as more men died engaged in muddy coastal swamp warfare than in the entire mountain campaign. I was to learn that Kokoda means ‘place of the skull’, and that the battle was known to the Japanese as the ‘Death Valley Massacre’.

Bert Kienzle was no ordinary Australian. As a boy, as a consequence of his father being a naturalised German, he and his family were interned by Fiji in Australia during World War 1. Later, he returned to school in Germany with his grandparents. As a young man, he spent seven years as a planter before getting into gold mining and setting up Mamba Estate in 1935 near Kokoda. Accounts of the early German influence in Australia, the isolation of expatriate life in the jungle, and drinking after sunset are not new, but it is easy and enjoyable reading.