

Soldiers' personal stories of valour

MILITARY HISTORY

BRAVEST. How Some of Australia's Greatest War Heroes Won Their Medals. *By Robert Macklin.* Allen & Unwin. 278pp. \$29.95.

AUSSIE SOLDIER. Up Close and Personal. *By Denny Neave with Craig Smith.* Big Sky Publishing. 316pp. \$34.95.

Reviewer: **JOHN FARQUHARSON**

With the appeal of Anzac Day apparently holding as strong a grip as ever on the imagination of Australians, so the consequent upsurge in the exploration of the nation's military history continues to flourish.

The past two decades have produced a significant crop of military history volumes. Apart from official histories covering the post-World War II campaigns up to Vietnam, the Centenary of Federation brought forth the *Australian History of Defence*, presenting an overview of Australia's war experience, which, though comparatively brief, has been strikingly eventful. With the big campaigns and personalities dealt with fairly thoroughly, interest seems to be growing in the personal experiences of war and how our servicemen coped with the stress of combat. Two books that fall into this category are Robert Macklin's *Bravest* and *Aussie Soldier*, compiled by Denny Neave and Craig Smith, both Army Reserve officers.

Their themes are "up close and personal", providing insights into the values and motivation of men who in the storm of battle are impelled to perform feats of the highest gallantry. Macklin, well known to Canberra readers as a journalist and now full-time author, tells the story of some 12 Australian Victoria Cross winners, along with several others decorated with the George Cross, from the Boer War to Vietnam. With economy of words, he also explores their lives beyond the actions that elevated them to fame.

Using personal anecdotes, excerpts from unpublished diaries, letters and interviews, *Aussie*

Soldier gives us personal perspectives – from World War I to Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as peace-keeping missions in Rwanda, Timor and Somalia – on what being a soldier meant.

Macklin follows a traditional narrative style, whereas Neave and Smith have adopted what I would call a thematic notebook approach. Of the two Macklin's is the more cohesive, while *Aussie Soldier* lends itself more readily to dipping in and out.

Macklin's work is also timely, updating the way in which our highest decoration for valour has developed and how the kinds of things for which the VC is awarded have changed over the years. One of the most significant of those changes, under amendments introduced by the Hawke government, extended the eligibility for the VC beyond members of the Defence Forces "to other persons determined by the Minister".

In other words, civilians, police and other civil authorities would also be eligible, a reversion to the conditions applying at the time of the Indian Mutiny. The amendments also gave the final word on the award of the honour to the Prime Minister. Though not foreseen at the time that the amendments became law in 1991, the changes mean that "pre-eminent acts of valour" performed in these days of the so-called war on terror could be recognised with a VC. Another unforeseen consequence stemming from the current regimen is, some service people feel, that through broadening eligibility, the honour has been devalued.

But as with Anzac, the public's fascination with the VC and its winners shows no signs of diminishing, if the number of visitors to the War Memorial's Hall of Valour, devoted to VC memorabilia, is any indication. Macklin makes the point that though technology may have changed the face of the battlefield, soldiers on the ground are still the major determinants of the outcome. The old ideals of gallantry, honour, selflessness and sacrifice remain, inspiring some

to acts of magnificent courage, comparable to the deeds of those past VC winners.

The retelling of some of their extraordinary feats, from our first VC winner, Neville Howse in the Boer War, to Albert Jacka in World War I to William Newton in World War II and Keith Payne in Vietnam, still leaves us in awe of what men can rise to amid the squalor, death, pain and horror of war. Their feats are also what make this book a compelling read. That sense is evident, too, in *Aussie Soldier*. Interspersed with author's comments, it is essentially a book of quotations grouped under thematic chapter headings. It gives insights into what it was like to serve in combat situations on a day-to-day basis.

Not all the content is related to combat. There are personal experiences of everyday army life reflecting the many forms a soldier's job can take today, quotes from letters to and from home and a variety of stories and anecdotes. The final chapter, "Battle Book", is a reference summary

to the battles and campaigns in which contributors to the book were involved.

Typical of some of the lighter-vein entries is this one from Private Donald Johnson, 2/25th Battalion, doing it tough in New Guinea: "I was sitting behind a gum tree with the bulldog ants eating me alive, and the Japs were knocking the bark off both sides of the tree. My eyes were full of bark chips and if that wasn't bad enough, my mate, George Gibson, was throwing sticks at me and yelling, 'Stop jumping around you bastard, you're drawing the crabs!'"

These two books confirm that the traditions of the digger – of individualism and mateship – are alive and well and the mystique attached to that little bit of dark red ribbon and the medal with its simple "For Valour" inscription will long endure.

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Fredrick and Albert Wright, left, soldiers in World War I; Private Miller, above, in Somalia, stopping to play with a child. The little girl's mother was only 13. Pictures: *Aussie Soldiers*

