

The Digger distilled

A trickle of books about Australians at war has become a torrent, writes **Patrick Walters**

IN December 1918, Winston Churchill looked forward 100 years from “the headstream of Australian history” to a time when Australians would re-examine their role in the world-shaking events of the Great War.

Churchill envisaged that Australians would then “seek out with the most intense care every detail of that struggle; when the movements of every battalion, of every company, will be elaborately unfolded to the gaze of all; when every family will seek to trace some connection with the heroes who landed on the Gallipoli peninsula, or fought on the Somme, or in the other great battles in France.”

As we approach the 70th anniversary of World War II and the centenary of the outbreak of World War I in 1914, interest in Australia’s military history continues to grow exponentially.

As historian Michael McKernan points out, only a generation ago the past was another country when it came to writing Australian military history. Until the 1980s the Australian War Memorial was the only important publisher of books on Australians at war.

Now the trickle has become a torrent, with dozens of publishers large and small churning out new books every year. They range from academic campaign studies, biographies and popular histories to anthologies, visual records and accounts of modern pilgrimages to distant battlefields.

As Churchill accurately predicted in 1918, Australians have developed a hearty appetite to learn more not just about the Great War and Gallipoli and the Western Front, but World War II as well.

Books on Australia’s experience in World War II, particularly the Pacific theatre and the prisoner of war experience, continue to be published in ever larger numbers, many of them timed for publication around Anzac Day.

Few of the latest crop of new military history books add much to what we already know about Australia’s part in the 1939-45 conflict, but Phillip Bradley’s book on the little-known battle for Wau in 1942-43 is a standout. Bradley has emerged as one of

the finest chroniclers of the Australian Army’s role in the New Guinea campaign. His previous book *On Shaggy Ridge* — the story of the 1943-44 Ramu Valley campaign — is a minor classic.

The Battle for Wau tells the story of how a vastly outnumbered Australian force known as Kanga Force managed to hold the old goldmining town of Wau, with its strategically vital airstrip, fighting a lengthy guerilla campaign against advancing Japanese troops.

In early 1943 a last-ditch Japanese assault was beaten off by Australian

commandos and a timely airlift of reinforcements of the 2/5th Independent Company from Port Moresby, the first airlift of a complete army unit in the New Guinea campaign.

Bradley combines an engrossing telling of the story from the tactical level based on extensive interviews with veterans with a fine appreciation of strategy at the command level. As with his book *On Shaggy Ridge*, *The Battle for Wau* is based on thorough research of primary sources, as well as deep personal knowledge of the terrain in which the Australians fought.

Charles Happell’s book *The Bone Man of Kokoda* is another worthy addition to the literature of the New Guinea campaign. Happell tells the extraordinary tale of Kokichi Nishimura, the Japanese soldier who survived the Kokoda campaign and later came back to Papua New Guinea to search for his lost comrades.

Nishimura’s 144th Regiment was part of the elite 5586-strong South Seas Detachment of the Japanese Imperial Army sent to invade New Guinea in March 1942. From his 56-strong platoon he was the only survivor. Of the 3500 troops of the 144th regiment who sailed south in 1941, 3264 did

not make it home: casualty rates that far exceeded the Australian experience in the campaign. Such was the effect of the war on Nishimura that he abandoned his family in Tokyo in 1979 to spend the next 26 years living in PNG, searching for the remains of his lost comrades, most of whom had no known grave.

“You might see it as a big sacrifice to lose your family, but what sort of sacrifice is it against that made by the soldiers who died in New Guinea?” the 87-year-old veteran told Happell. “Comparing my situation to theirs, digging up bones for 26 years was quite a small thing, small sacrifice. I owed them that at the very least,”

Melbourne-based Peter Ewer has written

Forgotten Anzacs, the first account of the involvement of Australian and New Zealand troops in the ill-fated Greek campaign in 1941 since Gavin Long’s official history more than 50 years ago.

Ewer gives a good account of both the political and military aspects of that fiasco. He takes particular note of NZ’s contribution to the fighting on the Greek mainland and Crete, noting the sharp contrast between the two national armies on the question of race. Our Anzac cousins had

always found a place for Maori volunteers in their army. In the Australian Army it was a different story.

Gavan Daws’s masterly account of the 140,000 Allied PoWs in the Pacific, *Prisoners of the Japanese*, is also republished this month by Scribe.

Daws’s work remains remarkable for the brutal rawness of his prose as much as his scholarship. It is still the best single work on the PoW experience across the Pacific theatre, covering the Australian, British, US and Dutch forces.

As Daws writes, above all the hell of the PoW camps were the men “who, against terrible odds, kept the faith and kept each other alive. These little brotherhoods have stayed close ever since, closer than with any other human beings. Fifty years on, they would still do anything for each other, unquestioningly. To the death. Their closeness as PoWs has been the meaning of their whole lives.”

The Men of the Line, a beautifully designed publication from Melbourne University Publishing, focuses on the survivors of the Thai-Burma railway. Author Pattie Wright concentrates on the memories of 68 Australian PoWs, 55 of whom she inter-

viewed. She has taken a novel approach, with each veteran telling a different story marking each of 68 sections of the railway stretching 415km from Ban Pong in Thailand to Thanbyuzayat in Burma.

In *Aussie Soldier Up Close and Personal*, Denny Neave and Craig Smith pay homage to the Digger using hundreds of short diary extracts and anecdotes gathered from nearly 100 years of conflict.

With chapters on mateship, compassion, trust and loyalty, and stories of larrikins and close shaves, this offers a cheerful snapshot of the Australian soldier at war from Gallipoli to Iraq.

There are plenty of familiar quotations and a few new faces as well.

Books discussed in this article are: *The Battle for Wau* by Phillip Bradley,

Cambridge University Press; *The Bone Man of Kokoda* by Charles Happell, Pan Macmillan Australia; *Forgotten Anzacs* by Peter Ewer, Scribe Publications; *Prisoners of the Japanese* by Gavan Daws, Scribe Publications; *The Men of the Line* by Pattie Wright, Melbourne University Publishing; *Aussie Soldier Up Close and Personal*, by Denny Neave and Craig Smith, Big Sky Publishing.



Invasion: A landing by the 7th Australian Division in 1945 to evict the Japanese from Borneo



Eye on our history: Winston Churchill