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BOOK REVIEW

Somme mud: the war experiences of an Australian infantryman in France 1916 – 1919

by E. P. F. Lynch (Will Davies, editor)

Random House Australia: North Sydney, 2006, 347 pp., ISBN 978 1 74166 894 0,
RRP \$24.95 (paperback), Ursula Davidson Library cal no. 570.3 LYNC 2006

The Great War has spawned some remarkable books over the 90 years since its cessation, yet this book is among the best of them. Most Great War books have focused on the politics, grand strategy, strategy and/or tactics from the perspective of senior officers, historians or politicians; or have recorded the war histories of units and formations that took part. *Somme Mud*, however, is one of a much smaller genre that describes trench warfare on the Western Front as experienced by the common soldier – in this case an Australian infantry private who fought in each of the major campaigns from late 1916 to the war's end. I doubt that any better book of its genre has been written.

The author, Edward ('Nulla' to his mates) Lynch, a New South Welshman, volunteered for the Australian Imperial Force at 18 years of age, apparently straight out of high school, where he must have received a good education for he seems to have had no trouble conversing with the inhabitants of rural France *en Français*. Indeed, he was used by his cobbers as an interpreter when out of 'the line'. As a further indication of his intelligence, he quickly became adept at navigation by night around the front and support lines and in no-man's land.

He served throughout the war as a private soldier – mostly as a rifleman, but frequently called on to be the company runner (because he was such a good navigator in the dark) and occasionally a battalion signaller (*i.e.* telephone operator and linesman) – in D Company, 45th Battalion (a New South Wales battalion), 12th Brigade, 4th Australian Division. He was wounded-in-action six times, remaining in the line whenever he could and on each other occasion – one occasion required hospitalisation and convalescence in England for nearly six months – returning to his platoon as soon as he was able. That he survived so long is a testament to his military skill and, more particularly, to his good luck. In both attack and defence, he came within a hair's breadth of being killed on numerous occasions.

To what extent he kept a diary during the war is unclear, but we do know that, in the late 1920s and early 1930s while serving as a school teacher in the Riverina, he recorded his experiences in pencil in 20 exercise books. He was commissioned in the Australian Military Forces during World War II and, while serving as commanding officer of the Jungle Training School (Lowana) in 1943, found time to type

up his pencilled notes in the form of a book with a view to having it published. Publication, however, did not eventuate during his lifetime. In 2002, Edward Lynch's grandson passed the typed manuscript to Will Davies, who edited it and was instrumental in having this abridged version of it published by Random House in 2006. In doing so, he has done us and future generations a great favour.

If you have ever wondered what it is like to assault an enemy position through intense artillery, machine-gun and rifle fire; to fight through the objective with 'bombs (*i.e.* hand grenades), bullets and bayonets'; to prepare a captured position to withstand a counter attack; to prepare a new defensive position, survive intense artillery bombardment and beat off an enemy attack; to patrol no-man's land and maintain listening posts in it; to conduct raids and capture prisoners; to cope with, seek out and kill snipers; and to make life comfortable when resting behind 'the line'; then you should read this book. Lynch deals several times with each of these and many other daily experiences of life as an infantryman at war – including the evolving ethics on the front line practised at soldier level by both sides as if by mutual agreement (such as whether or not to shoot stretcher bearers and enemy seeking to surrender at the last minute *etc.*) – as he recounts his experiences during the latter part of the Somme Campaign (1916), Bullecourt (1917), Messines (1917), Passchendaele (1917), the final German offensives on the Somme (spring 1918) – Dernancourt, Villers-Bretonneux, Hamel – and the advance to victory in the final offensives on the Somme (summer/autumn 1918) from Amiens to the Hindenburg Line.

When I was a young soldier, I received first-hand accounts and excellent training in many of the above techniques from veterans of World War II and Korea. I also read widely to expand my knowledge and understanding of how battles develop and how to be effective as an infantryman and survive on the battlefield. I am sorry, though, that this book was not available to me at the time. It would have added immeasurably to my education. It should be compulsory reading for all prospective infantrymen and I recommend it to anyone who would like to know what life is like as a private soldier in combat.

David Leece

