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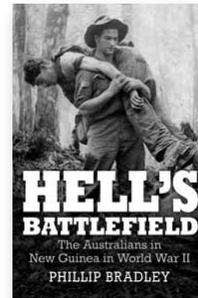
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BOOK REVIEW

Hell's battlefield: the Australians in New Guinea in World War II

by Phillip Bradley

Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, NSW; 2012; 528 pp.; ISBN 978 1 74237 270 9; RRP \$49.99 (hardcover); Ursula Davidson Library call number: 580.14 BRAD 2012



Hell's Battlefield is Bradley's fifth book about the battles fought by the Australians against the Japanese in New Guinea in World War II. His earlier books dealt with specific battles. This one covers all the New Guinea battles in a single volume – the first book ever to do so.

In a 4-page Introduction, the author provides a succinct history of the colonial ownership of New Guinea in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and then briefly summarises the battles fought there in World War II. In subsequent chapters, he deals with each battle in chronological turn. I shall now focus on two of those battles (Rabaul and the Buna beach-heads) and leadership issues.

When the 2/22nd Battalion Group (Lark Force) was deployed to Rabaul early in 1941, the superior headquarters provided little guidance to the commander who, despite having over nine months to prepare, did little effective defensive preparation before the invasion. When the invasion occurred in January 1942, only one company briefly offered some effective resistance before he ordered the battalion to scatter. The Japanese landing force consisted of only three battalions supported by artillery and engineers. A battalion group should have been able to provide sterner resistance. A number of Australian Imperial Force (AIF) commanders criticised the battlefield performance of some of the partly trained and poorly equipped militia battalions, especially the 53rd Battalion. None, however, performed worse than the AIF's 2/22nd Battalion.

If 2/22nd Battalion group had been intended as a screen, then it should have been withdrawn as soon as the Japanese entered Rabaul Harbour, as the Royal Australian Air Force attempted to do with its men after failing to gain air superiority. Although the Navy had heroically evacuated the Army from Greece and Crete, nothing was planned or attempted to rescue the 2/22nd Battalion. The soldiers were forsaken and became prisoners. Few survived the war.

The pre-war decision to defend Rabaul should have been matched by sound military and naval appreciations and the allocation of adequate defence leadership and resources. The loss of the port to the Japanese allowed them to use it as a base for the Kokoda, Milne Bay and Solomons campaigns. Rabaul's fall was a strategic loss to Australia.

In World War I, soldiers became cynical of 'chateau generals' – army commanders who lived in comfortable accommodation remote and safe from the frontline. These 'chateau generals' issued orders without understanding the frontline conditions. Bradley shows that MacArthur and Blamey, living in another country, took this

remoteness to another level, yet tried to micromanage battles at battalion and company level despite not understanding the terrain, climate and tactics under which the soldiers were dying.

Although Blamey had successfully resisted the British generals' attempts to break up the Australian divisions into brigade groups in the Western Desert, he did this himself in the New Guinea campaigns so he could directly pressure brigade commanders. Brigades were committed piecemeal to battle in company and battalion groups often before the brigade was complete within the area. This resulted in rushed attacks with consequent losses in Australian lives.

The battle for Papua's northern beach-heads (Buna, Sanananda and Gona) in 1942-43 became a major source of attrition of the Australian infantry battalions. Blamey, however, hoarded the best 'bunker-busting' weapon available to the Australian Army – the A12 Matilda II tank, an infantry support tank – back in Australia. The A12 tanks of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment had supported the capture of Bardia and Tobruk by the 6th Australian Division in 1941. Some Australian generals, however, had declared that tanks could not operate in jungle and so the infantry brigades were committed to the Buna beach-head battles without tank support; notwithstanding that the Japanese had used tanks effectively at Milne Bay. Slowly, the obvious need was recognised with half-hearted attempts being made with universal carriers, then light tanks. When the 2/6th Armoured Regiment, which had trained in Australia for armoured warfare, arrived in the Buna area to support the 18th Brigade battalions, its crews had not been trained in support of infantry. They had to learn the infantry support role on-the-job from the 18th Brigade, which had worked with tanks during the siege of Tobruk. The generals had to re-learn the lessons.

The book is not kind to any leader who had failed to correctly manage the battle space. It is well-researched and referenced. The battles are well described with good maps. Bradley's personal knowledge of the terrain shows in his descriptions of the conditions under which the various battles were fought. The heroism of the soldiers and junior leaders is well documented. The egos of MacArthur and Blamey were behind most of the bad decisions made.

This book will be of value to anyone interested in jungle warfare, poor senior leadership, infantry battles and Australian history. If someone is going to read only one book about any New Guinea battle, then this is the book to read.

John Hitchen