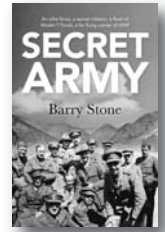


BOOK REVIEWS:

Secret army: an elite force, a secret mission, a fleet of Model-T Fords, a far flung corner of World War I

by Barry Stone

Allen and Unwin: Sydney; 2017; 248 pp.; ISBN 9781760290689 (paperback); RRP \$29.99
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Secret Army tells the story of 'Dunsterforce' – an Allied military force raised in late 1917 and named after its commander, General Lionel Dunsterville. The force comprised about 350 Australian, New Zealand, British, Canadian and South African officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), who were tasked to organise local pro-British units in northern Iran and southern Caucasus to replace the Tsarist armies that had been fighting the Ottoman forces in Armenia.

Barry Stone tells the story of these hand-picked veteran soldiers who were sent to the ethnic powder keg of the Caucasus to preserve British interests. They matched wits with German spies and assassins. They fought the Turks. They dined with sheiks, outraged local mullahs, forged unlikely alliances with Russian Cossacks, helped Armenians flee genocide, and saved the lives of thousands of starving Persians. Little known today, this is a story of ingenuity, bravado, exotic characters and dangerous encounters – as well as a fleet of Model T Fords.

The primary objective of Dunsterforce was to protect Britain's position in the Middle East and India. Operating in an unpredictable strategic environment, Dunsterforce's objectives evolved over time; the operation suffered from what modern strategists have labelled 'mission creep'. Originally tasked with training local levies, Dunsterville's mission evolved into a field force where the force drove in 500 Ford vans and armoured cars, about 350 km from Hamadan in Persia to Baku on the Caspian Sea. By

occupying Baku and thus controlling the Caspian, Britain hoped to forestall a Turko-German invasion of India. Dunsterforce fought the Battle of Baku from 26 August – 14 September 1918, but then retreated from the city on the night of 14/15 September. Two days later Dunsterforce was disbanded.

Secret Army includes a detailed account of how in July 1918, Australian Captain Stanley Savige, with five officers and 15 NCOs of Dunsterforce, set out towards Urmia and were caught up in the exodus of Assyrians, after the town was captured by the Ottoman army. About 80,000 people had fled and were defended by the Dunsterforce party, which helped hold off the Ottoman pursuit and the attempts by local Kurds to get revenge on the Assyrians, for their earlier plundering. By the time the rear-guard reached Bijar on 17 August, the Dunsterforce party was so worn out, that only four recovered before the war ended.

Secret Army includes 15 black and white images, one map, a bibliography and an index. Barry Stone is a journalist and travel writer. He is author of *The Desert Anzacs* and *The Digger's Menagerie*; and has written on topics as varied as mutinies in the age of sail, and a history of hermits and recluses.

Secret Army is recommended for those who are interested in a lighter military history account in a little-known corner of World War I.

Marcus Fielding