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BOOK REVIEW

Bardia: myth, reality and the heirs of Anzac

by Craig Stockings

University of New South Wales Press: Sydney; 2009; 481 pp.; ISBN 978 1 92141 025 3; RRP \$59.95 (hardback); Ursula Davidson Library call number: 587 STOC 2009



In January 1941, 6th Australian Division captured the Italian fortress of Bardia. Dr Craig Stockings, who researches Australian military history at the Australian Defence Force Academy, contends that the traditional story of victory at Bardia is an example of battlefield 'truth' being obscured by Anzac mythology. This book examines why the Australians were so successful beyond the 'innate' qualities of the Australian infantryman. I consider his explanation to be controversial.

Part 1 gives a good account of the lead-up to the battle, but has deficiencies. It fails to point out that Mussolini lacked a clear military aim, which was reflected in the lack-lustre performance of the Italian forces. Yet, when Marshal Balbo was killed, Mussolini failed to appoint a dynamic replacement to invigorate the Italians.

Following defeat at Sidi Barrani, many Italians were able to escape, due to inadequate British infantry to round them up. They strengthened the Bardia garrison, but Stockings does not assess whether they also sowed the seeds of defeat.

Bergonzoli intended to defend the fortress perimeter, but Stockings fails to note that, to do so effectively, would have necessitated: security positions forward of the wire; aggressive patrolling; designated counter penetration positions; well-rehearsed counter attack plans; artillery ammunition forward at gun positions; and emergency stocks of food and water near perimeter posts.

Part 2 describes the battle. 16th Brigade, commanders well forward, was able to adjust its plan as problems arose; and its 2/2nd Battalion captured the vital town water supply. The 17th Brigade plan, though, had a fundamental flaw and the commanders of 2/6th Battalion and 17th Brigade wilfully misinterpreted Mackay's intentions. Stockings does not comment on why Mackay and Savige allowed 2/6th Battalion to continue operations in the south when it would have been of greater value in the west. 17th Brigade started Phase 2 unbalanced and kept on stumbling. Savige's lack of knowledge of the locations of his sub-units on occasion denied his brigade the artillery support it needed. It failed to achieve its objectives and 19th Brigade had to be introduced into the battle. Once it had sorted out the problems caused by 17th Brigade, it systematically cleared the enemy within the brigade's area.

In Part 3, Stockings seeks to explain why the Italians performed poorly and the Australians were successful. While the Australian official histories may include war-time propaganda and myths, the reasons now proposed by Stockings may not be valid either.

For example, Stockings provides the tactical reasons why the posts were rolled up one by one, but does not comment on why the Italians did not counter this. A typical post held about 60 men, yet only 10 could bring their weapons to bear. A military commander typically allots sufficient resources to do the task without a surplus. As only 10 out of the 60 could fight from within the post, the superior commander probably envisaged the 50 men being employed outside the post. If, as Stockings contends, the "I" (infantry) tank was the greatest bogey to the Italians, each post commander should have employed the spare 50 soldiers on tasks such as: providing observation and fire on the anti-tank ditch and minefields; providing all-round protection to the post from suitably-sited trenches; providing machine-gun posts able to fire on fixed lines along the anti-tank ditch; and providing mutual support to adjacent posts. Each post should have been the hub of a defensive position and not the sole defended point within its area. Had the defenders been spread out, the attackers' artillery fire would have had to be spread over the whole area, not just concentrated on the post. Post 11, which had dispersed external fighting positions, was able to hold out for the longest time.

Stockings appears to have been overawed by the "I" tank, but it was armed only with one 2-pounder gun and one machine gun, and was vulnerable to Italian minefields and artillery. Its employment in the Bardia attack should have come as no surprise to the Italians, who should have prepared their soldiers better psychologically for its use and upgraded Bardia's anti-tank defences before the battle.

There are other issues that should have been discussed: the percentage of the Italian 10th Army that spoke Italian; divisions within the Italian Officer corps between regular and conscripted officers; the effectiveness of Allied propaganda broadcasts on Italian morale; and the presence of the Italian chemical warfare company in Bardia.

This well-referenced book is a significant addition to Australian military literature. Its attack on the mythology of the Australian infantryman, however, may disenchant some readers who do not critically examine the weaknesses in many of the author's arguments. For someone starting to read about the Western Desert campaigns, books such as Gavin Long's *To Benghazi*, Kenneth Macksey's *Beda Fomm* and Barton Maughan's *Tobruk and El Alamein* would be better starting points before a specialised book such as *Bardia* is read.

John Hitchen