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Stories from Sandakan: 2/18th Bn

by Kevin Smith

*K R & H Smith: PO Box 404, Armidale NSW 2350; 2011; 205 pp.; ISBN 978-0-646-54919-4;
RRP \$35.00 (paperback); Ursula Davidson Library call number: 529 SMIT 2011*



This is a self-published account of how only 10 men out of the 174 all ranks of the 2/18th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, who were sent by the Japanese as prisoners of war to Sandakan, Borneo, in 1942-43, survived to return to Australia in 1945. It breaks new ground, for, compared to campaigns in Papua and New Guinea like Kokoda, travails such as 2/18th Battalion members experienced in Borneo are much less familiar to Australians.

Kevin Smith, a distinguished academic at the University of New England, is a dedicated military historian. A member of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales, he has written seven books, the last four on Australian military history.

This book's focus is the deprivations and challenges faced by the men of the 2/18th Battalion. It explains and illustrates the impacts on volunteers of military training, operations, capture and a brutal imprisonment. There are 15 chapters which trace the chronology of the 2/18th Battalion, beginning with the battalion's recruitment and training in Australia, its experience of combat at Mersing and Singapore in Malaya, and its subsequent captivity at Changi and in Borneo,

including time at Kuching and Sandakan, and two marches to Ranau.

The book reflects the author's extensive research of the available records, combined with his interviews with survivors or their families. It includes an extensive bibliography, comprehensive referencing, biographical notes on key battalion personnel, and many photos, cartoons and illustrations from war archives and personal collections. It is printed in folio size and the larger scale and clear print facilitate ease of reading by older people.

The book's accuracy is supported by three observations: it is based on scholarly research and also draws on the recollections of surviving battalion members and their families; the foreword is written in glowing terms by the current president of the 2/18th Battalion Association; and another expert who reviewed the book for me supported its veracity.

This highly readable recounting of the experiences of battalion members is suitable for those wanting to understand the personal impacts of war on members of a World War II infantry battalion. The book is a worthy addition to our understanding of one of the most difficult and poorly publicised campaigns of World War II. The author has done an outstanding job in bringing the accomplishments of the 2/18th Battalion to the attention of a wider readership.

Michael Hough