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Uneasy lies the head: a history of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan

by Arthur W. John

The Gen Publishers: Cheltenham, Vic.; fourth (special) edition 1999; 275 pp.; ISBN 0-731-61243-4; Ursula Davidson Library call number: 455 JOHN 1999

This book is the memoir of an Australian Army education officer serving with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) in Japan following World War II. It provides the vivid recollections of a 'personality' – a highly articulate, self-educated man with a love of the English language.

Starting as a private in the Army's education service in 1941, but with little formal education, Arthur Johns rose steadily through the ranks and by late 1944 had made captain. In 1946, he was appointed Deputy Assistant Director in the Australian Army Education Service with the BCOF. His appointment to the rank of major was notified in a cryptic message: "Congratulations; see Henry IV Part II Act III Scene 1". This is the scene where King Henry IV opines "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" – hence the name of the book. On his return to Australia in 1952, he was appointed Director of the Royal Australian Army Educational Corps in Melbourne. He retired from the Army in 1961.

The author provides excellent insights into the realities of service as a non-combat-arms officer post-war. For those who can remember the post-war Australian Army prior to the Vietnam era, this book will bring back sharp memories of 'the way it was' then, with a very formal and officious peace-time military bureaucracy expecting that its rules and procedures would be obeyed without question, and senior officers who became very officious if 'good order and discipline' was upset in any way!

Arthur John explains how the occupied Japanese and the multi-national BCOF slowly learned to work together to create the foundations of modern Japan – a society learning to adapt to a world of the no-longer-'divine' Emperor, and learning the challenges of a military-imposed democracy.

There are 28 'mini' chapters. They trace the chronology of John's Army postings over the period 1945-1952. The author has an incredible eye for detail in describing aspects of everyday life. An example is his explanation of how a 'Wing' of the Royal Military College was established in Japan in 1948 to enable selected officers to qualify for/justify commissions in the new Australian Regular Army – which he attended and at which he qualified.

The book does not have a traditional bibliography or referencing. Rather, it is based on a series of anecdotes supported by photographs of contemporary life in Japan. It is written in a very personal style. Its appeal is based on its

author's obvious affection – initially reluctant and then rapidly growing – for the Japanese people in their difficult post-war situation; its wide use of anecdotes drawn from all levels of activity within the BCOF; and many unique photographs, accompanied by insightful analyses of the military attitudes then prevalent. In particular, Johns reveals the quite different approaches to resourcing and discipline adopted by the key nations of the BCOF – the United States, India, Britain, New Zealand and Australia – all serving under the Tokyo-based leadership of General Douglas MacArthur.

This personal insight into a unique period of Australian Army history is suitable for those wanting to understand the emergence of modern Japan and the foundations of our modern professional Army. Our Library copy is a special edition and was presented to the Institute by Honorary Member Michael Waterhouse on behalf of the late author.

Michael Hough