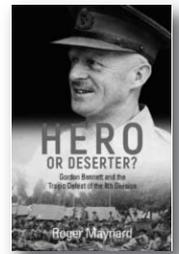


BOOK REVIEW:

Hero or deserter? Gordon Bennett and the tragic defeat of the 8th Division

by Roger Maynard

Penguin Random House: Docklands, VIC; 2017; 374 pp; ISBN 9780143783923 (paperback); RRP \$34.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 588.14 MAYN 2017



Roger Maynard has produced a most worthy study of two of the most tragic and controversial events in Australian military history. These events, which occurred during World War II, are: (1) the surrender of the 8th Australian Division to the Japanese in Malaya in February 1942 and the subsequent treatment of its members while Japanese prisoners-of-war; and (2) the flight (escape back to Australia) of its commander, Major-General Gordon Bennett, without the permission of his British commander, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival.

Before his escape, Bennett had played a prominent role in the defence of Malaya and Singapore. A colourful character, his officers found him at times abrasive and cocky, but he was also known for training his division rigorously before the Malayan campaign. He is, however, best remembered for his daring escape by boat from Singapore in the dying days of the Japanese invasion. Bennett's decision to leave his men to their fate was most controversial. While he was subsequently exonerated by the Australian prime minister, he was never forgiven by many of the army's senior officers for what they regarded as his desertion.

The book to me offers the best account of Bennett's actions as Singapore was about to fall, his adventurous escape with a few staff officers, his true motives and his travails on return to Australia. It is a fulsome account of the campaign. It includes priceless recollections from 8th Division members – of whom few remain.

Maynard does not flinch from Bennett's personality flaws, especially his inability to develop and maintain relationships with his peers and superiors that would be resilient under pressure. His soldiers, however, almost invariably supported Bennett's departure; and his intellect and personal courage from the time he first donned a uniform in 1907 until his resignation in 1944, remain undoubted.

Maynard relates Bennett's keen, but unfounded, ambition to become Australia's strategic commander – rather than Blamey or Lavarack. Bennett's command experience was entirely at the tactical level of war, although he had seen operational command at close quarters.

Bennett's promotion to lieutenant-general and appointment by Blamey to command III Corps in Western Australia in 1942 would not have been made if Blamey thought Bennett was not up to the job had the Japanese landed north of Perth as anticipated. But Bennett's resignation from the Army in 1944, and his published apology, *Why Singapore Fell*¹, have probably brought him little credit.

As with almost every commentary on Bennett,

Maynard does not fully cover Bennett's post-war activities. Bennett served as the second controller of the Ku-ring-gai Civil Defence Unit (now a State Emergency Services Unit) from 1957 (the year he turned 70) to 1960². This was after his first heart attack; and when the nation was concerned about nuclear warfare and needed to develop doctrine and plans against nuclear weapons. Bennett died on 1 August 1962.

Some currently-serving officers, drawing on their recent experiences, provide Maynard with their insights into Bennett's actions. I feel that attitudes against Bennett have hardened since the events of 75 years ago. More importantly, his enduring shadow has influenced adversely subsequent relationships between the Australian Staff Corps/Australian Regular Army and the Militia/Citizen Military Forces/Army Reserve. I concluded years ago, after reading the first major biography of Bennett by Frank Legge³, that Army Reserve members must work to develop positive relations with their Regular counterparts and appreciate the environment in which regular/permanent Australian Defence Force members serve.

Maynard concludes that "*You either support Bennett or you don't*"; so, he was both a hero and a deserter (p. 388). Nevertheless, it is hard to go past the conclusion of historian A. B. Lodge that Bennett: "*was probably the best of the mediocre collection of generals in Malaya, but it is doubtful whether his performance against the Japanese and the information he conveyed to Australia justified his departure from Singapore*"⁴. On the other hand, even those generals would have done better with adequate air and naval support and if the welfare of the civilian population had not been such a compelling concern.

This book is well and respectfully written, coherent and balanced in the evidence offered in pursuit of answers to the question put. There are helpful photos, useful chapter notes and an impressive bibliography. This work deserves the attention of every serious student of Australian military history.

Ken Broadhead

¹Bennett, Henry Gordon, Lieutenant-General (1944). *Why Singapore fell* (Angus and Robertson: Sydney) Ursula Davidson Library call no. 588 BENN 1944.

²Two other members of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales, have held this position, Flight Lieutenant Stuart Doyle and Brigadier Olaf (Zac) Isaacson.

³Legge, Frank (1965). *The Gordon Bennett story* (Angus and Robertson: Sydney). Ursula Davidson Library call no. 501.2 LEGG 1965.

⁴Lodge, A. B. (1984). Lieutenant-General Henry Gordon Bennett: a model major-general? Page 174 in D. M. Horner, editor, *The commanders: Australian military leadership in the twentieth century* (George Allen & Unwin: Sydney). Ursula Davidson Library call no. 501.1 HORN 1984.