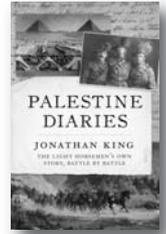


BOOK REVIEW:

Palestine diaries: the Light Horsemen's own story, battle by battle

by Jonathan King

Scribe Publications: Brunswick, Victoria; 2017; 448 pp; ISBN 9718925322668 (Australian edition, paperback); RRP \$39.99



Palestine Diaries is a truly remarkable account of the Australian Light Horse deployed to the Middle East and the battles it fought from the Sinai to Damascus from 1916 to 1918. It provides the reader with a strategic overview of the Middle East campaign and provides an understanding of the campaign as it unfolds. It discusses the rationale for the campaign initially commanded by General Sir Archibald Murray and followed by General Sir Edmund Allenby.

The author, Dr Jonathan King, an award-winning historian, has been producing books and films about World War I since 1994. He leads battlefield tours to Gallipoli and the Western Front, and is a regular television and radio commentator, as well as a writer for newspapers. After lecturing at the University of Melbourne for many years, he has written more than 30 books and produced 20 documentaries.

Palestine Diaries is not a just a history book. It contains the diaries, letters, and photos of those brave young men, whose service and sacrifice helped shape our nation. The diaries of the troopers provide a wonderful insight into their daily routines, their attitudes, fears and aspirations. Told simply with an attitude that is purely Australian, the troopers capture the violence of the battles and record their sentiments in their diaries.

While the book contains numerous extracts from the diaries of many troopers and officers, it draws heavily on the diary of Trooper Ion ("Jack") Idriess of the 5th Regiment, 2nd Brigade, Australian Light Horse. Idriess was an adventurous gold prospector from outback Australia, who had been taught by Aboriginal tribes how to survive in the desert. His assiduous updating of his war diaries, carried in his saddlebags, provides a remarkable account of the campaign and demands the reader's attention. In recognition of Trooper Idriess, the author dedicated the book to him.

The author has ensured that the many other individuals within the Australian Light Horse are not ignored and recounts their actions, aspirations, and addresses the fears of the fighting men and the love they shared for their horses. The hardships and privations experienced by the troopers in their daily routine throughout the campaign, reflecting an admirable acceptance of their situation, are humbling.

The mounted force, of which the Australian Light Horse was a component, was the spearhead of General Allenby's Egyptian Expeditionary Force and the push to defeat the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Men and horses provided the fighting machine that was effective, highly mobile and showed an enduring resilience. On their way northwards towards Damascus, the British

forces with their Australian and New Zealand mounted troops captured 40,000 Turkish (including some German) prisoners, with less than 100 Light Horsemen captured by the enemy.

From the first battle at Romani, the Australian Light Horse proved itself a remarkably tough and effective fighting force, winning the admiration of the then commander, General Murray. That first battle also helped to expunge the bitter taste experienced by the Light Horse at Gallipoli when troopers of the 8th and 10th Light Horse Regiments were slaughtered at the Nek. The only Victoria Cross to be awarded in the Great War to the Australian Light Horse was won by Lieutenant Hugo Throssell in the battle for Hill 60, Gallipoli.

The author places the Palestinian campaign into perspective with the battles fought on the Western Front. The highly mobile Light Horsemen and the advances made by Allenby's forces on their march to Damascus draw a stark comparison with the tragedy of the trench warfare of the Western Front.

The success of the Middle East campaign provided a war-winning outcome that provided an offsetting influence to the stalemate of the Western Front and eventually an impetus to the final victory of the Great War with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. The superb leadership, common sense and the humanity of Lieutenant-General Sir Harry Chauvel shines through.

The author does not spare the British and French Governments for their duplicity when considering the division of the spoils of war and their broken promises to Colonel T. E. Lawrence. He had recruited the Arab Army that fought a parallel and complementary campaign beside the Egyptian Expeditionary Force and without whose support victory may not have been possible.

Throughout the book, the strong attachment held by the troopers for their horses is obvious. The resilience and stamina of horses bred in the main around the Tamworth region is legendary and was instrumental in the success of the Light Horse, and, ultimately, the success of the Middle East campaign.

When considering this book, the prospective reader should not be concerned about being faced with numerous and perhaps disjointed diary accounts as its name might imply. It is well written, absorbing and highly informative. History has not accorded the rich recognition deserved by the actions of the Australian Light Horse and this book goes some way to correct this oversight. It will appeal to those readers with an interest in the history of World War I.

Bob Treloar