

BOOK REVIEW:

Secret & special: the untold story of Z Special Unit in the Second World

by Will Davies

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Secret & special: the untold story of Z Special Unit in the Second World recounts the operational history of the Inter-Allied Services Department. It was formed at the request of General Blamey in April 1942, four months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and the invasion of Malaya. It was styled on its British counterpart, the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and renamed Special Reconnaissance Department (SRD) in 1943.

For 37 years, Will Davies was an independent producer of historical documentaries and series for the ABC and SBS. On retiring in 2010, he began writing books, the first published in 2012, with 10 books since then. They include *In the footsteps of Private Lynch* (Random House: North Sydney, 2008); *Somme mud: the war experiences of an Australian infantryman in France 1916-1919* (Random House: North Sydney, 2010), which he edited; *Beneath Hill 60* (Vintage Books: North Sydney, 2010); and *The last 100 Days: the Australian road to victory in the First World War* (Vintage Books: North Sydney, 2018). He was a member of the New South Wales Anzac Council and leads battlefield tours to the Western Front. In 2018, he gained a Doctorate of Philosophy degree from the Australian National University.

Will Davies provides an interesting overview of Australia between the wars and the desperate endeavour to develop capabilities to successfully defeat the Japanese advance. SRD's first operation was Operation Jaywick in September 1943, a covert attack on shipping in Singapore Harbour by Z Special Unit, formed within the SRD. Against the chaotic background of the fall of Singapore, Jaywick was the idea of an Australian master mariner who had rescued many civilians fleeing the island, and a British SOE operative.

Jaywick was undertaken by a mixed force of Army and Navy personnel, the majority being drawn from the Navy. Using an old Japanese fishing boat renamed *Krait*, the operation was a spectacular success – sinking or seriously damaging seven ships totalling over 39,000 tons – and ensured the continued existence of SRD.

The unit was tasked to “*obtain and report information of the enemy ... weaken the enemy by sabotage and destruction of morale and to lend aid and assistance to local efforts to the same end in enemy occupied territories*”. Over the next two years, SRD conducted numerous operations, planning for which required significant detail and accurate intelligence; and was subject to continually changing Allied objectives.

Z Special Unit operations were conducted in Timor following the Japanese invasion – these operations were

far from successful and were compromised by poor planning, inadequate attention to detail and substandard radio procedures which resulted in the deaths of many operatives. Then followed a series of operations along the northern coast of New Guinea – they required operatives to travel long distances to reach their areas of operations, a feat of determination, skill and endurance. In all, Z Special Unit undertook intelligence gathering and raiding missions throughout Southeast Asia including New Guinea, Singapore, Timor, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam and the Dutch East Indies. Important in their operations were the vessels manned by Navy personnel.

While many of the operations were successful, SRD also suffered some significant disasters. The most notable were those conducted on Timor and a second attempt to sink shipping in Singapore Harbour in October 1944 when all members of the raiding party were either killed, or captured and executed, by the Japanese.

Will Davies has captured the essence of these operations, expertly describing the challenges and often atrocious conditions that faced the men of Z Special Unit, their actions against the enemy and the constant knowledge that capture meant torture and death. He has expertly blended their operations into the mosaic of the war in the Southwest Pacific.

Of note, he has addressed the gamut of operations conducted by Z Special Unit beyond the famous attack on Singapore Harbour (Operation Jaywick), providing an informative and candid appraisal of their operations. He has provided the human touch to a band of men who for many years went without recognition of their feats. While the military value of SRD's operations has been questioned, the men involved were truly brave men and their exploits were accomplishments.

In 1945, it was reported that SRD guerrilla and intelligence operations had resulted in 7061 Japanese killed and 141 taken prisoner; and the rescue of 1054 servicemen and civilians from enemy-occupied territory. SRD's stated casualties were 18 killed; 11 executed; two died as prisoners-of-war; 36 believed killed; and four drowned.

Secret & Special is easy to read and is well researched. It has 10 pages of end notes and an effective index. It provides the reader with an informative picture of the war conducted in the jungle and the islands on Australia's doorstep while detailing the hardships, heroism and resilience of the men of Z Special Unit. It will appeal to readers with even only a passing interest in the military history of Australia's near north.

Bob Treloar