

BOOK REVIEW:

Courage under fire

by Daniel Keighran VC, with Tony Park

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This book is the memoir of Corporal Daniel Keighran, Delta Company, 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (D Coy, 6RAR). It is co-authored by Major Tony Park (Ret'd), an Army Reservist and author of some 22 fiction and non-fiction books.

Daniel Keighran, a Queenslander, was born in Nambour in 1983 and was raised initially at Maroochydore. His father, a drover, had abandoned his family, but Dan's maternal grandfather, a former World War II artilleryman, became his father figure. His grandfather taught Dan to fish and shoot, and provided him with a sound, ethical example for living.

When Dan was 11-years-old, his father, who lived constantly on the edge of the law, returned to the family. He bought an undeveloped farm at Lowmead in outback Queensland which he hoped to develop into a cropping and grazing property. He also used it to grow marihuana as a cash crop. He built a shed on the property which the family used as their home. It had a dirt floor covered with old carpet, and lacked running water, sewerage or electricity services. While the family lived in poverty, Dan relished the freedom he enjoyed in the Queensland bush and he developed a range of bush-living skills, resilience and courage which would stand him in good stead later.

In 2000, having completed Year 12, Dan joined the Army with his grandfather's encouragement. He was accepted into the Infantry Corps aged 17 and was posted to D Coy, 6RAR, a motorised infantry battalion based at Enoggera, Queensland.

The first 10 years of the 21st century was a period of high operational intensity for the Australian Defence Force. Dan's first operational service was in Malaysia in 2001, training with the Malaysian Army in jungle warfare. His second was in East Timor in 2003 in a peacekeeping role; and third was back to Malaysia in 2004, this time to train the Thai Army in counter-insurgency operations against Islamic separatists on the Thai-Malay border.

These deployments taught Dan much about infantry fighting and leadership, but he was finding repeat training boring. So, he did a mortar course before the East Timor deployment, but was retained in D Coy. In 2005, 6RAR was re-equipped with the Bushmaster protected mobility vehicle (PMV), a large, four-wheel drive, armoured truck with a v-shaped hull designed to protect the crew and cargo from mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Dan did a driver/crewman course and became a PMV crew commander in the D Coy PMV detachment.

His fourth deployment was to Iraq in 2006, where a detachment of 6RAR PMVs provided protected transport for a 2RAR task group in al-Muthanna Province in southern Iraq. The principal danger to the PMVs and their crew came from snipers and IEDs. In two-man crews, the crewmen alternated between driving and manning the forward machine-gun usually a 7.62mm MAG58 or a 0.50 calibre.

His fifth deployment was to Afghanistan in 2007 to provide PMV support to Australia's Special Operations Task Group whose commandos and Special Air Servicemen were searching villages for persons of interest in the al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership.

Corporal Keighran's military career culminated during his last deployment, his second to Afghanistan, in 2010. On 24 August, at the Battle of Derapet in the Tangi Valley, Uruzgan Province, he served as a mentor to an Afghan National Army (ANA) platoon that was part of a combined ANA/D Coy, 6RAR fighting patrol. Dan risked his life by deliberately exposing himself multiple times to Taliban gunfire so as to identify enemy targets and to draw fire away from Australian soldiers who were treating a severely-wounded comrade.

After he returned from Afghanistan, Dan transferred to the Army Reserve, married his girlfriend, Kathryn, with whom he would have a son, Jack, and took a job working in the mines in Kalgoorlie.

In 2012, he was awarded the Victoria Cross for Australia (VC) for his gallantry during the Battle of Derapet. He became the 99th Australian to have received the VC. The VC changed his life for both good and bad. The award opened up new career opportunities in defence industry and made him a very humble celebrity, but the pressures of being absent from home on endless speaking assignments caused his marriage to fail. He now confesses to being a bit lost and to still be working out who he is and what he stands for.

Dan Keighran wanted this book to present his life, warts and all, in contrast to the sanitised biographical notes released by Defence Public Relations when the VC was awarded to him. This he has achieved very effectively. Some readers may have preferred a more romanticised version, but I much prefer to have been told what his life really was like, even if some bits make the reader uncomfortable. It is both an uplifting tale of courage, perseverance and humility, and of the pitfalls that can accompany fame. I thoroughly commend the book to readers of all backgrounds.

David Leece