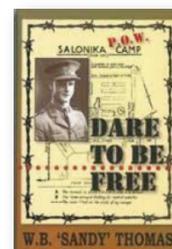


BOOK REVIEW:

Dare to be free

by W. B. 'Sandy' Thomas

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Dare to be Free is an escape and evasion memoir written just after World War II by Second-Lieutenant W. B. 'Sandy' Thomas, a rifle platoon commander of the 23rd (Canterbury-Otago) Battalion, 5th Brigade, 2nd Division, New Zealand Expeditionary Force. Severely wounded and captured by the Germans in Crete in May 1941, Thomas was hospitalised in Greece and, once well enough, made numerous attempts to escape. He finally succeeded, stole a boat in Macedonia and sailed to Turkey, before re-joining his battalion on the Turko-Syrian border in May 1942.

This book was first published in 1951, six years after the war ended. It has been reprinted and republished several times since. This 2009 edition is a limited special edition and the book reviewed had been signed by the author.

The author assumes that the reader recalls the Greece and Crete campaigns of April and May 1941. The memoir opens with the 23rd Battalion defending the Maleme Aerodrome in Crete against the German airborne offensive on 20 May 1941. During the subsequent Battle of Galatas, Thomas was severely wounded in the leg and, later, was awarded the Military Cross for his gallant leadership of 15 Platoon. Late in the battle, Germans overran the advanced dressing station where Thomas was being treated and captured him. He was transferred to a prison hospital near Athens, in Greece, and was very lucky to avoid having his leg amputated.

As soon as his leg had healed sufficiently, Thomas was determined to escape and return to the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in Egypt. He made several bold attempts from the Athens hospital, but on each occasion was re-captured. The exasperated Germans eventually transferred him to a more secure prison hospital in Salonika in northern Greece (Macedonia). To no avail. Displaying great imagination, daring and skill, and aided by not a little luck, Thomas managed to escape by night from the Salonika prison.

Thence followed several months of playing cat-and-mouse with the Germans as he evaded capture while constantly on the move in northern Greece. This was only possible with the aid of the Greek countryfolk and Orthodox monks on the Athos

peninsula (the Holy Mountain), who displayed great bravery in helping him – had they been caught doing so, they would have been summarily executed. After several failed attempts, Thomas, accompanied by five other escapees with whom he had linked up, managed to steal a Greek fishing vessel and sail from Athos to Turkey landing near Smyrna (Izmir). He linked up with the British consul in Smyrna, who put him on a train through Turkey to the Syrian border. Fortuitously, the 23rd (New Zealand) Battalion had just commenced to dig in on that border, so his homecoming was sweet.

The memoir ends at this point, but he would remain with the battalion for the rest of the war. Indeed, his subsequent war service saw him rise to command the 23rd Battalion in Italy at the age of 24, the youngest battalion commander in the New Zealand Army. For his war service, he was awarded the Military Cross twice (1941, 1942), the Distinguished Service Order (1943), and the United States Silver Star (1945). Post-war, Thomas transferred to the British Army. Eventually, as Major-General W. B. Thomas, CB, DSO, MC and Bar, ED, he became General Officer Commanding Far East Land Forces in Singapore from 1970 to 1971. Following retirement, he resided in New Zealand and Queensland where he died in 2017 aged 98.

Thomas is a great raconteur and this is a well-written and engaging book – indeed, it is quite thrilling in places. It provides insight into life as an Allied prisoner-of-war in Greece in 1940-41. It also depicts civilian life in northern Greece during the German occupation, not only in the cities but also that of the peasant communities and the monks of the Greek Orthodox Church. The tensions for civilians, between collaborating with the Germans for survival and loyalty to Greece and the wider Allied cause, are well drawn. I recommend the book to readers of all ages and backgrounds.

David Leece

