

BARDIA: MYTH, REALITY AND THE HEIRS OF ANZAC

Craig Stockings

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Reviewer: JOHN DONOVAN

Dr Craig Stockings' book examines the capture of Bardia in greater detail than earlier accounts. It is divided into three parts – The Setting, The Battle, and The Explanation. The first two parts are more satisfying than the third, which suffers from definitional looseness and circular arguments.

The Setting

This part provides useful background to the war in North Africa for those not familiar with events between the two world wars and in the early stages of the Second. When Dr Stockings covers the raising and training of the Second AIF, he notes specifically that a significant proportion of recruits for the 6th Division were motivated by memories of Australia's part in the First World War (whether those memories be called the ANZAC myth, legend, or tradition), memories that gave them a 'strong sense of self, pride and spirit', which probably affected their motivation.

Dr Stockings describes the embarrassing course of events for the Italian forces during the opening stages of the desert war. Significant numbers of Italian soldiers were killed, and many were captured, sometimes without a shot being fired, as the British 7th Armoured Division set about gaining physical and psychological dominance. The Italian ground forces showed only a limited grasp of modern tactics, sometimes using formations more suited to the Napoleonic era than the twentieth century.

This tactical grasp did not improve with experience, as demonstrated by the Italian advance to Sidi Barrani and the abject failure of the invasion of Greece. In the first three and a half months of the desert war, Italian casualties were some 20 times British casualties. The German Major General von Thoma noted the poor Italian performance and their logistic problems, and advised against German participation in the campaign.

Italian performance during the British/Indian attack on Sidi Barrani remained poor, encouraging a belief that further advances were possible, without undue risk. Dr Stockings mentions the dysfunction in the Italian higher command, and that some Italian prisoners 'seemed pleased that their part in the fighting was at an end'. He also notes the 'increasing Italian timidity and ineffective defensive procedure' in the Bardia garrison. Even Graziani indicated to his superiors in Rome that 'the Italians in North Africa would not cope well with a second serious defeat'.

The Battle

Readers who concentrate on this part would find much to confirm whatever version of the ANZAC myth/legend to which they might adhere. Small groups of Australian soldiers, platoons, sections sometimes even one or two men, often with the support of I tanks or artillery, but sometimes without that support, captured perimeter posts, artillery batteries, and large numbers of prisoners. Occasional pockets of resistance

were swiftly overcome; and good progress was made (one company alone sent back more than 1000 prisoners during the early stages of the attack).

Dr Stockings has particular concerns, however, about the activities of the 2/6th Battalion, and specifically the attack on Post 11, where the battalion suffered a sharp setback. While Post 11 proved too tough a nut to crack, even in the difficult conditions along the Wadi el Mautered some successes were achieved, at a cost, with the capture of Posts 7 and 9. Post 11 was almost the last Italian position in Bardia to surrender, and then only when menaced from all sides.

Dr Stockings lays the blame for the losses around Post 11 on Brigadier Savige and the CO of the 2/6th, Lieutenant Colonel Godfrey, for exceeding their orders. As events unfolded, this seems justified, however, Dr Stockings records in *The Setting* that the 2/6th Battalion 'displayed a particularly aggressive streak' during training exercises. He notes also that 6th Division headquarters and Colonel Berryman allocated the 'individual unit roles, tasks and timings' during pre-battle planning, an unusual procedure, while a complete field regiment was allocated in support of the 2/6th Battalion (albeit the same field regiment appears later in support of the 2/5th Battalion).

The evidence presented by Dr Stockings suggests that 6th Division headquarters and Colonel Berryman did initially intend the 2/6th Battalion to conduct offensive action, but changed their mind at some stage during the planning process. This action could have been the 'company raid' that Savige opposed during one pre-battle conference.

Having changed their minds, Major General Mackay and Berryman might have missed an opportunity to make better use of the 2/6th Battalion's 'aggressive streak'. A change by divisional headquarters in unit task allocations between the 2/5th and 2/6th Battalions might have produced better results in phase two of the main attack. If such a change had been made, given the less than aggressive performance of at least one company of the 2/5th Battalion during phase two, it seems unlikely that Posts 7, 9 and 11 would have been attacked in force.

Dr Stockings details the difficulties faced by the 2/5th and 2/7th Battalions attacking with limited artillery and tank support in phase two. He also records the impressive results they actually achieved, and the many prisoners taken, despite difficulties on the start line and the actions (or inactions) of one apparently reluctant company commander. Despite these results, divisional headquarters felt that the 17th Brigade was disorganised, and this perception told against Savige and his men for the rest of the battle. Berryman, in particular, 'was all too eager to conclude the worst'.

The second day saw clear indications of collapse among the defenders, with thousands of Italians surrendering, but the adverse perceptions of the 17th Brigade's performance brought to the battle Brigadier Robertson and his 19th Brigade, supported by the tanks and concentrated artillery that had not been available to the 17th. Robertson also had the support of a squadron of the divisional cavalry, an anti-tank battery, half of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, and the 2/5th Battalion to secure his start line and provide flank protection. Success against a collapsing defence followed swiftly.

Dr Stockings notes Lieutenant General O'Connor's complaint to Prime Minister Menzies about 'undisciplined' and 'troublesome' Australians, but omits Menzies

responses, that he understood ‘the Italians [had] found them very troublesome’, and they hadn’t ‘spent their lives marching around parade grounds ... [but came] to do a job and get it over’. Dr Stockings notes that after the battle, the ‘magnitude of victory validated the identity of 6 Division’, and that the Australians felt themselves ‘worthy of their Anzac inheritance’. Accolades from many quarters made the same points.

The Explanation

This part is the least satisfying in the book, for two principal reasons. First, Dr Stockings does not produce a clear, concise, definition of the myth he refers to in the title of the book. To the extent that he does define the ANZAC myth or legend (the terms seem to be used almost interchangeably, with tradition also used at times), it seems to be about bronzed Australian infantrymen, giants among men, defeating all enemies at the points of their shiny bayonets, unsupported and without training, which was not needed because of their ‘innate combat prowess’.

Second, Dr Stockings seems unwilling to accept that in a genetically diverse region, ethnicity and national characteristics are cultural constructs, and not genetically based. If they were purely genetic, there would be no such person as an American, and the population of Alsace-Lorraine would suffer from great genetic confusion after their various moves between French and German ethnicity! He also seems not to consider the possibility of links between national culture and the performance of national institutions.

Turning first to the ANZAC myth, Dr Stockings devotes Chapter 15 to recounting descriptions of the Australian performance against the Italians, noting the exaggerations in many accounts. However, some of the reports quoted were written during the war, and while Dr Stockings does acknowledge that wartime reportage had other purposes than historical analysis (among them discouragement of the enemy and encouragement of the home front), he seems disappointed that a more honest *public* analysis of events did not occur at the time. Dr Stockings specifically rejects O’Connor’s comment that the battle was ‘an outstanding example of the value of morale as opposed to material’, yet O’Connor could not be considered a propagandist for the ANZAC legend.

Dr Stockings describes the ‘flip side’ of the ANZAC legend as the ‘image of physically weak, cowardly, even effeminate Italian soldiers’. However, by the time of Bardia, both the 6th Division and the war correspondents whom Dr Stockings criticises would have been well aware of the actual failures of the Italian ground forces during their advance to Sidi Barrani, their invasion of Greece, and their defeat at Sidi Barrani. Even Albert Kesselring (hardly a propagandist for the ANZAC myth) saw the same cultural problems (albeit, like many Germans of the era, he also saw a racial issue), while Mussolini’s assessment of the Italian character, based on casualties among Italian generals, was at least as scathing as any assessments by ANZAC mythologists.

Dr Stockings does not seem to give full consideration to some of the words he quotes. Barrie Pitt’s book *The Crucible of War, Western Desert 1941*, comes in for particular criticism. However, each of the quotes from Pitt mentioned by Dr Stockings on page 298 was qualified in the original. The description of soldiers of the 6th Division as ‘big men ... it seemed [emphasis added] that those who weren’t well over six feet tall ...’

omitted the introductory phrase ‘to one startled observer’, while Pitt qualified the description of ‘advancing giants’ with ‘appeared to be’, and the context clearly suggested an optical illusion, caused by the soldiers being silhouetted against the setting sun. Finally, the quote about Italian defenders being ‘morally shattered’ was qualified by the word ‘apparently’. In context, the quotes give a different impression.

Clearly, not all Australian soldiers were six feet tall (the reviewer’s father, five feet three inches tall, served in the western desert with the Second AIF), but equally clearly, these perceptions had some basis. Putting Australian authors to one side, if Dr Stockings is unhappy with the words of British authors like Lieutenant General Taker, General Jackson and Field Marshal Carver about large Australians, he might note the words of another unlikely propagandist for the ANZAC myth. On 1 May 1941, Erwin Rommel observed some men captured at Tobruk, ‘fifty or sixty Australian prisoners ... immensely big and powerful men’. While fifty or sixty random prisoners might not be a statistically significant sample, the impression their appearance made on Rommel is noteworthy.

Dr Stockings rejects the idea of ‘innate Italian military ineffectiveness’, and refers to the ‘real objective military factors’ that can explain the Italian defeat. He devotes much of Chapters 16, 17, 19 and 20 to discussing these factors. However, phrases such as ‘the Italian Army was better equipped in 1915 than it was in 1941’, or descriptions of Italian industry as ‘in a condition of stubborn and parochial backwardness’ and references to a low standard of education and the regime’s ‘deficiencies as a coordinator and contractor’ suggest the existence of significant institutional problems.

Dr Stockings also refers to the ‘systemic weaknesses of the overall Fascist war effort up to 1941’, but does not conclude from all this that the ‘real objective military factors’ he describes might have been based on cultural factors in Italian national life (which were not necessarily genetic in origin, and so not immutable). The failure to distribute the large stocks of food available in Bardia to troops on the perimeter is a good example of these weaknesses. Hundreds of Italian vehicles were captured in Bardia, the distance to the perimeter was not great, but distribution of the available food did not occur. It should have been easier for the Bardia garrison to receive some of the stocks of tinned veal and fish found later inside the perimeter than it was for the British logistic system to bring Christmas treats forward to the besiegers.

Dr Stockings earlier commented that Bardia demonstrated that static fortified positions manned by infantry ‘could be easily surrounded, cut off, and penetrated at will by a concentrated all arms thrust’. In Chapter 17, he repeats this assessment, stating that the perimeter at Bardia was ‘vulnerable to defeat, one post at a time’. Tobruk had a similar perimeter defence system. There, a different garrison, ‘inexperienced and lacking equipment’, falling back from a lost battle, with the help of British tanks and artillery and British and Australian naval forces, but virtually no air support, was attacked by a well trained, efficient, enemy with air superiority and effective tanks. The results demonstrated that the fall of a static position was not inevitable.

Dr Stockings alludes to one problem at Bardia – the limited construction around the perimeter posts of additional infantry pits, foxholes or sangars. Where these were prepared (as at Post 11), the defence was more effective. Such work was implemented

rapidly at Tobruk, and penetration of the perimeter there did not lead inevitably to collapse of the defence. One could continue with comparisons between the two battles, but this would only belabour the point.

Dr Stockings makes much of the technical weaknesses of Italian tanks and artillery. The Matilda was superior to the Italian medium tanks, but, based on Dr Stockings' account, some of the Italian technical weaknesses seem to have been the result of the institutional weaknesses in Italian society, industry and government he described. The attackers made much use of Bren carriers, which were hardly superior in firepower to the Italian light tanks, and had thinner armour, while Italian medium tanks were later taken into service by the allied forces, and used to at least some effect, as was captured Italian artillery during the siege of Tobruk. With the arrival of the Germans, the balance of armoured vehicle quality was reversed.

Dr Stockings quotes Mackay's assessment that 'Without tanks, it would probably have taken weeks of heavy fighting ... to capture [Bardia]'. This quote is in accordance with another version of the ANZAC tradition with which Mackay and his senior officers would have been familiar, but which is not so centred on the Australian infantryman. This is Monash's statement that the:

true role of the infantry was not to expend itself upon heroic physical effort ... but on the contrary, to advance under the maximum possible protection of the maximum possible array of mechanical resources in the form of guns, machine guns, tanks, mortars and aeroplanes ... to be relieved as far as possible of the obligation to fight their way forward ...

An examination of the battle of Bardia against this version of the ANZAC legend would have been interesting.

Dr Stockings' argument becomes circular when he discusses Italian command and leadership in Chapter 19. He accepts that these were faulty, but states that these faults had little to do with 'ethnicity, culture, or national character'. However, much of the chapter consists of discussion of a range of culturally based reasons for these failings, including the lack of prestige for military service in Italy at that time, inappropriate conceptual frameworks, backward looking philosophies, conservative, narrow-minded and conventional attitudes, an institutionalised tradition of avoiding responsibility, and doctrinal shortcomings. In addition, Italian officers were 'deliberately distant and aloof from those they commanded'.

Cultural factors such as the 'functional shortcomings of the military bureaucracy', and 'the mindset of the Italian officer corps' seem also to be the cause of at least some of the deficiencies in Italian training identified by Dr Stockings, with training continuing 'on a peacetime basis' even after the declaration of war. The Australians, on the other hand were, he states, 'more than well prepared', suggesting that the ANZAC myth of 'innate combat prowess' did not limit their leaders' commitment to hard training.

As Dr Stockings points out, Italian failure seemed inevitable. However, he ignores the possibility that the cultural problems he describes were the basis of the 'real objective military factors' that caused the defeat. Strangely, while he accepts that 'many aspects

of the Anzac myth ... are culturally based [and] built on Australian social mores', the Italian problems, at least in Dr Stockings' estimation, were not culturally based.

Dr Stockings also glosses over the problems of the Australian Army. Referring to the initial training of the 6th Division in *The Setting*, he mentions the 'conspicuous lack of officers and non-commissioned officers', and the availability of but 'one Lewis gun and a few rifles ... for each platoon'. Other authors have recorded the limitations of the Australian Army's training between the wars. In *The Battle*, Dr Stockings reviewed briefly the 'regular/militia' differences in the 6th Division, and concluded that while some of the complaints from Savige, for example, were 'based more on emotion than on objectivity', the regulars did 'promote their own interests'. Even with these internal problems, the 6th Division developed in a way that the Italian Army did not.

In his conclusion, Dr Stockings states that had the 6th Division 'met an Italian formation in the field with more than a year of hard training behind it, the result might not have fitted so neatly within the Anzac paradigm'. Indeed, but the Italian forces had been at war at various times since 1936, in Ethiopia, Spain and France, and had not managed to develop such formations, whereas the 6th Division was raised from scratch in fifteen months. Based on Dr Stockings' own work, the reason that such an Italian formation was not available would seem to be at least partly based on cultural failings in the Italian society of that era.

Summary

Dr Stockings asks why 'tradition has demanded that Anzac mythology be a substitute for history?' A good question, and there is undoubtedly room to review the ANZAC myth/legend/tradition, in whichever version it might be told. Even Charles Bean, after all, recognised the 'good and the bad, the greatness and the smallness' in the ANZAC story. However, review is not the same as denial, and the ANZAC tradition was based on actual events. Many Australian histories do cover allied efforts; many do not denigrate Australia's adversaries with ethnic jibes. What is needed is careful assessment of all the available evidence, without preconceptions (in either direction).

There are some editorial quirks in the book. The style of unit designations used by the UNSW Press (6 Division rather than the 6th Division, 2/6 Battalion rather than the 2/6th Battalion, for example), and the inconsistent use of definite articles before unit designations, affect the flow of the narrative. Some designations are inconsistent (the 104th Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery appears variously as 104 Field Regiment, 104 Field Regiment, RHA and 104 RHA). It does not become clear for some pages, and then only in passing, that the 1st Battalion, Royal Northumberland Fusiliers, is a machine gun unit. Endnote 67 to Chapter 19 gives several Australian unit titles incorrectly. A few words seem to have been dropped during the production process, and Dr Stockings sometimes uses convoluted sentence structures, which almost need careful parsing to be understood.

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