

Review of *Desert Sands Jungle Lands: A biography of Major General Ken Eather* By Steve Eather, Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2003, 236 pages, paperback, \$35.00. Reviewed by Richard Gehrmann in the *Australian Public Intellectual Network Review of Books* issue 26, [August 2004](#)

Steve Eather, *Desert Sands Jungle Lands: A Biography of Major General Ken Eather*, Allen & Unwin, 2003, pp 233,pb \$31.00 ISBN1 74113 182 6

In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in Australian military history of the Second World War, and a corresponding increase in research and publication on this aspect of our past. *Desert Sands Jungle Lands* falls within the strong tradition of military biographical studies that has seen a range of accounts of the lives of former soldiers such as Vasey, Blamey, Honer and Potts. Readers will now have the opportunity to assess Australian history with this biography of Major General Ken Eather. While for some readers Eather may be a name associated with victory at Kokoda, this book paints a much more complex and fascinating picture. The author (incidentally a distant relative of his subject) is a well established writer of military history who with this book has created a well written and carefully researched account of the life an Australian citizen soldier.

Denied by his age the opportunity to fight in the First World War, Eather combined his civilian work as a dental mechanic with service in the part time Army. He trained hard and was rewarded with promotions that reflected his diligence and tenacity in an era when his lack of experience in battle made him an anomaly in an Army dominated by returned servicemen of the 1st AIF. For many who read this book as a study of successful leadership, there might be a wish for more detail on Eather's character at this formative stage. Sparse archival records have contributed, but the link between the leadership in peacetime and in war raises interesting questions.

In 1939 Eather sold his practice at a loss to assume command of the 2/1st Infantry Battalion. While he later progressed to command of the 25th Brigade and the 11th Division, his place in the development of the new 2nd AIF was an achievement that is perhaps under recognised compared to his later successes. The training and shaping of an army of predominantly civilian volunteers was not an easy task, and Eather's work in giving life to an 800 strong battalion was as important as later campaigns. In an era of professional armies, we forget that most men and women who served between 1939 and 1945 had little or no prior military experience. This hard training bore fruit in early 1941 when his soldiers played a key role in the Australian victory at Bardia. Success was followed by failure. An infantry battalion is an organic entity, and Eather's troops fought in the disastrous Greek campaign without their pneumonia-stricken leader. In a masterly understatement, the author notes that the fact that only 70 returned played heavily on Eather's mind.

Kokoda has grown increasingly significant to the lay reader of history since Paul Keating's 1992 call to reorient Australian remembrance. Popular works are complemented by *Desert Sands, Jungle Lands* in that like Edgar's biography of Potts

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and Brune's of Honer, the campaign is viewed from the commander's position. It was as a commander at Kokoda that Eather made his greatest mark on Australian history, and enthusiasts will greatly enjoy this section of the book. In September 1942 Eather made the decision to withdraw to Imita Ridge, the last line of defence only 42 kilometres from Port Moresby, thus precipitating a command crisis between Blamey and Macarthur. The role of the commander at Kokoda is superbly emphasised by the use of an evocative contemporary photograph on the book cover.

Eather's later campaigns are followed in some detail, while the recuperation of Eather and his brigade is given little attention. Less eventful than the fighting in New Guinea, the extensive period of training was significant, and like many accounts this one does not dwell on more than a year of inaction. Perhaps there is scope for future military historians to undertake work in this area, as while the role of the commander and soldier in combat is usually given attention, periods of quiescence are more typical. There are valuable lessons to be learnt which would interest to both historians of World War Two and even to contemporary soldiers who spend most of their time training for wars that they never fight. The need to retain reader interest naturally dictates that the long period of stagnation on the Atherton Tableland is not described in detail, but Eather's task in maintaining both his own focus and that of his troops was arguably as great as his achievements as a fighting commander.

After the accidental death of Vasey created a series of vacancies in the Australian command structure, Eather's talents were recognised, and he was promoted to Major General in the final stages of the War. In civilian life, Eather made further contributions by taking steps to bridge the gap between the Vietnam generation of returned soldiers and those of his own war. A useful glossary and excellent command assessment as an appendix complement this most readable account of Major General Eather's life and career - Australian history is well served by Steve Eather's book.

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