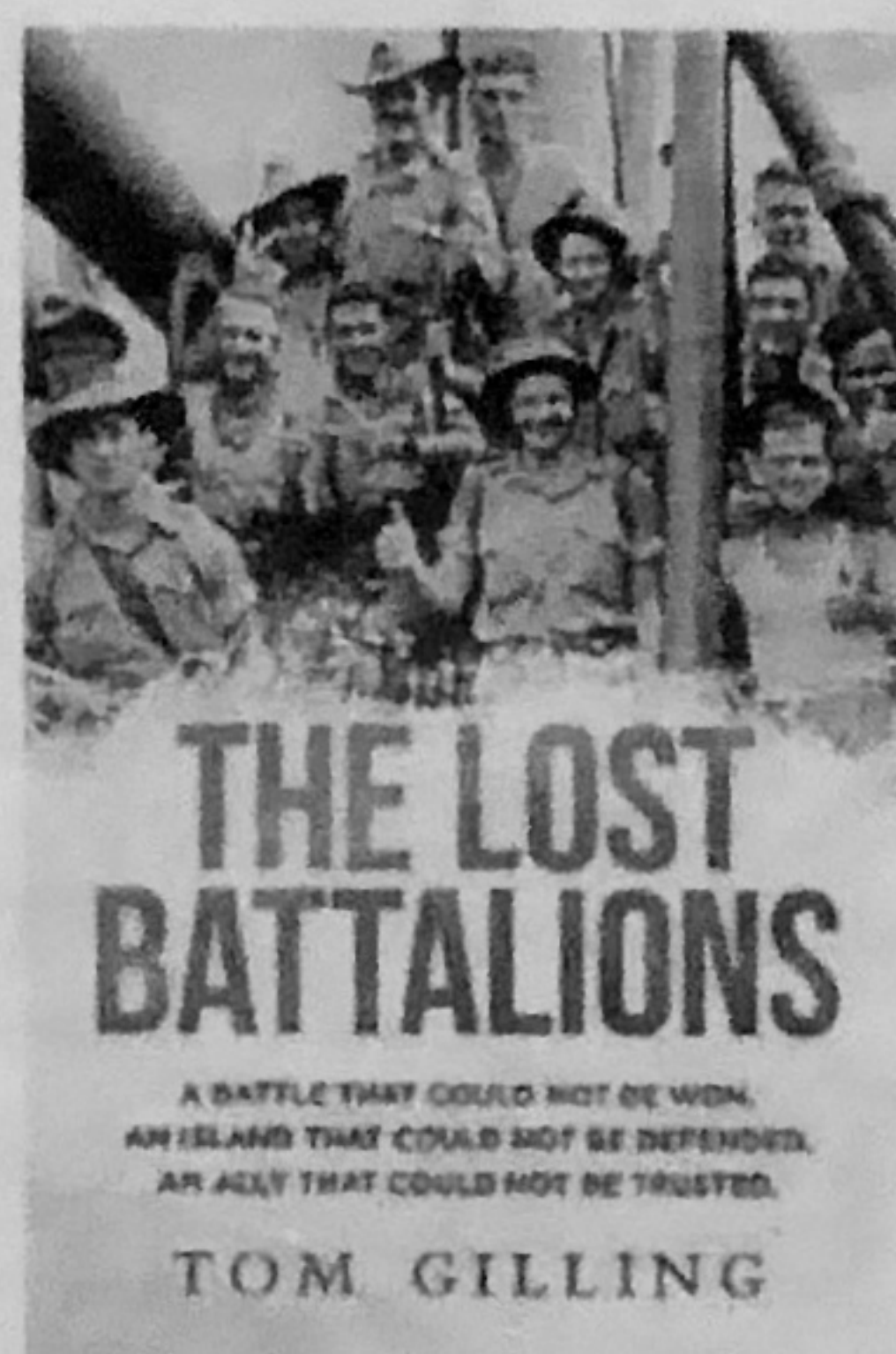


The lingering toll of wartime brutality

REVIEW BY MICHAEL SEXTON



HISTORY
The Lost
Battalions

TOM GILLING

ALLEN & UNWIN, \$32.99

The seemingly insatiable market for books on Australian military history has resulted in a number of previously undiscovered corners of this world being now explored by authors. In this vein, Tom Gilling has tracked the experiences of two battalions of the Australian army that largely travelled together between the years 1941 and 1945.

The two battalions in question were the 2/3rd machinegun and the 2/2 pioneers, both of whom were under the general command of Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Blackburn, an Adelaide lawyer who had won a Victoria Cross in the Great War. In the second half of 1941 both groups fought Vichy forces in Syria, where they sustained relatively modest losses. But all that was about to change. In early 1942 they were shipped to Java where, together with Dutch, British and American forces, they confronted one segment of the wave of Japanese troops that was moving across south-east Asia. There was fierce fighting in Java but by early March all the Allied forces there had surrendered.

The samurai code of Bushido that had come to influence the Japanese military in the 1930s supposedly dictated death before surrender, making prisoners a subject of contempt to their captors. The members of both battalions found themselves working on separate sections of the Siam-Burma railroad that was to supply the Japanese army in Burma. It was a massive construction project that had to be carried out without the aid of heavy machinery and over the most difficult of terrain. The conditions under which the prisoners worked have been often described but they are detailed particularly graphically in this book. In retrospect it seems a miracle that any of them survived the combination of strenuous physical labour, malnutrition, constant beatings and diseases such as malaria, dysentery and cholera.

There were heroes such as the surgeon E. E. "Weary" Dunlop, working on a bamboo operating table in the open and at night with hurricane lamps and a torch for illumination. But there were also tensions between captured Australian officers, who were generally treated better, and other ranks. The book touches very lightly on this question that does not seem to have been the subject of a great deal of discussion in the various works on the fate of Australian POWs in Japanese captivity.

The railway was finished in October 1943. More than 2600 Australians had died, together with nearly 10,000 other POWs and perhaps 90,000 native workers. Those survivors from the two battalions considered still fit to work were shipped to Japan in 1944. Some were drowned en route when their ships were torpedoed and others succumbed to pneumonia in Japanese coal mines.

A number of those taken to Japan were close enough to the city of Nagasaki to see the sky change colour when an atomic bomb exploded over one of its districts on August 9, 1945. It would be tempting to say that the objections to the use of the bomb do not seem so strong after reading this book but the real issue was the potential loss of lives of an invading Allied army and the decision to use this new weapon can be justified in that context.

All in all the two battalions lost 372 members over those years but many of the survivors continued to have severe physical and mental problems for the rest of their lives. There were, of course, some war crimes trials after 1945 in relation to the Pacific region, but, like the German military commanders at Nuremberg, the Japanese armed forces on the whole escaped very lightly in the aftermath of the war.