

Book Review

by Noëlle M. Cowling*

War in Italy, with the South Africans from Taranto to the Alps. Author, Jack Kros. Published by Ashanti Publishers, Johannesburg, 1992

War in Italy by Jack Kros is the eighth release in the "South Africans at war" series which is currently being published by Ashanti Publishers. The book comes in a hardcover edition which boasts many photographs and maps, some of which have not been published before. The Ashanti series as a whole undoubtedly contributes to a greater awareness of South Africa's often understated contribution to some of the major global conflicts of the 20th century although at times, many of the authors are guilty of tending toward a journalistic approach rather than an historical one. This is also true of Jack Kros, who is a journalist and as such he remains true to his profession. This however should not disqualify Kros or detract from his ability. A point in his favour is that he flew with the SAAF during World War Two, and consequently he delivers a lively and empathetic account of that War.

War in Italy is written in a narrative style and records events in a straightforward chronological order, except for certain chapters which deal with specific subjects. These subjects range from the role played by women in uniform to Army chaplains, and these chapters are interspersed throughout the book. In addition to the narrative, Kros has made use of oral history to a large degree by offering a number of accounts of the war, punctuated here and there with humorous anecdotes from veterans which reveal the lighter side of soldiering. The book subsequently makes for easy reading and provides a good insight into the human side of war. It should be noted that the author's approach to the subject creates the strong impression that his intention was to emphasise the role of the troops as opposed to their commanders, as the bulk of the text concentrates on the circumstances surrounding the troops and their views of the war and

Italy. If one is looking for a strategic and tactical analysis of the campaign it should be borne in mind that *War in Italy* does not provide much information in this area.

The content of the book traces South Africa's involvement in the Italian campaign. The book begins with the creation of the 6th SA Division in the Western Desert, where the training and fitting out of the division was conducted. Kros then details the troops' journey across the Mediterranean Sea and their arrival in Italy. As far as the campaign itself is concerned the author covers all the major battles, as well as some of the smaller skirmishes in which South African soldiers fought. A vivid illustration of the difficult transition which had to be made by the 6th Division's troops is sketched. Kros outlines a number of factors which were present in Italy that had not been in the North African theatre. Apart from the fact that the troops were accustomed to desert warfare and the tactics of the *Afrika Korps* as opposed to the *Waffen SS*, rear guard, attention is also given to the presence of the other Allied forces in the area, notably British and American. The 6th Division's relations with these larger Armies, particularly the United States Army, was strained at times. Occasionally tension was caused by ongoing irritants, such as the U.S. Army's longstanding tradition of "friendly fire", at other times national rivalry was the cause. Kros makes a case in point by detailing the Allied assault on Rome where the Springbok's were poised to take the city only to be beaten by the American's. U.S. General Mark Clarke had deliberately disobeyed orders to seize Valmontone and sent his Army to Rome instead. Kros describes how and why these actions resulted in the unnecessarily prolonged campaign as thousands of Germans were able to retreat

and regroup because of the gap left by the U.S. Army. On a happier note the 6th Division's triumphant entry into Florence and the last battles of the campaign are covered, along with the sightseeing excursions enjoyed by the troops, as the pace of the war began to slow.

The presence of the South African Air Force in the Italian war theatre is not forgotten and a portion of the book is devoted to its activities which included large scale participation in the "Warsaw Concerto", during which the SAAF bomber crews were exposed to a very high level of danger and suffered heavy losses. In addition to the Army and the Air Force, various different corps also receive special attention from the author. These are the Sappers, The Cape Corps, the Native Military Corps, the Womens Auxillary Services and the Chaplains, all of whom fulfilled invaluable support roles behind the troops at the front.

Unfortunately *War in Italy* is marred by a number of flaws, some of which are careless errors. For example, some of the field artillery pieces in photographs are incorrectly named and at least one photograph has the wrong caption beneath it. More disturbing however, is Kros's almost total reliance on secondary sources for his information. The bibliography lists hardly any archival records even though it is an accepted fact amongst most historians that original and pioneering works only materialise from a critical analysis of primary sources. As a result *War in Italy*

does not provide new knowledge or thinking on South Africa's role in the European battle theatre and one would not be inclined to recommend the book as an academic reference. Bearing in mind that it may not have been Jack Kros's intention to produce a new history of the Italian campaign, it is nevertheless unfortunate that more use was not made of the archival records available on this subject.

The result of Kros's overwhelming reliance on secondary sources is a book which, although enjoyable to read, presents us with the usual cliches and writing styles which characterise popular South African military history. If *War in Italy* is compared to Neil Orpen's *Victory in Italy* the latter remains the definitive work on the 6th Division's campaign history in Italy. This should not imply that Kros's book is not worthy of being favourably compared with Orpen's book. The fact is that "Victory in Italy" is a detailed academic analysis, and quite simply, "War in Italy" offers little that is new on the campaign and therefore, mounts no serious challenge to Orpen's book.

Notwithstanding the book's weaknesses, *War in Italy* is, in the final analysis, an interesting and well illustrated account, and for those who are unfamiliar with the details of the 6th SA Division and its history, it should also prove to be informative.

Miss **N.M. Cowling** BA (Hons), Directorate Documentation Services. Pretoria.