

BOOKS

THE DIVISION'S LAST BATTLES

ROAD TO TRIESTE. By Geoffrey Cox.
William Heinemann Ltd., London.

(Reviewed by Major-General
H. K. Kippenberger)

THIS is a very good war book. We are fortunate that the last and not least notable campaign fought by the Division that served this country in Middle East should have been so well and understandingly described.

Geoffrey Cox was one of a group of brilliant young journalists who were becoming well-known before the war. They had been in Spain or in China, had seen the Anschluss and the seizure of Czechoslovakia, and had written books and widely read articles. The curtain-raisers ended and the great tragedy opened. They continued to watch and report events, and Geoffrey Cox wrote a book on the Finnish War and was nearly captured when the Germans entered Paris. He got to England and promptly enlisted in the 23rd Battalion, Second N.Z.E.F. The others continued throughout the war to be journalists, became famous war correspondents, and wrote profitable books.

Cox was not left long in the ranks. He was commissioned and became Divisional Intelligence Officer and served in that capacity in Greece, in Crete, and in the Libya battle of 1941. Then he spent an impatient year or two on the New Zealand Legation staff in Washington and returned to his old job half-way through the Italian campaign and remained to the end. He was an extremely capable and reliable Intelligence Officer. It is satisfactory to find that he has written a book so much better than any written by war correspondents and that the sacrifice of his Fleet Street prospects was only temporary. It is not always true that the observer sees most of the game. The war correspondent's book is very often a little off the line, often a long way from it. It seems that one must have been a soldier to write truly of war, and watching is not enough.

The Second New Zealand Division was one of the assaulting divisions, as so often before, in the Eighth Army's last offensive in Italy. Four long hard years had passed since the Division's first campaign, in Greece. It had survived four disasters, had shared in great triumphs and in many bitter slogging battles, and it had suffered 25,000 casualties. No division in the Western armies was so experienced in battle. It might well have been battle weary, but it had the same commander, and the same quality, and once more was the spearhead of Eighth Army.

It is a fact that the Division was first across the Senio, first across the Sarnano, the Sillaro, the Gaiana, each a river line stubbornly defended, that throughout it led the Army's advance, thrusting on ahead of other Divisions but not failing to help them along, that in succession it defeated three German divisions, and that finally it retained enough impetus to drive through to Trieste and there showed firmness, restraint, and strength enough to deal effectively with a desperately difficult and tangled situation. This was a very fine performance, only possible to a highly battleworthy, experienced, and



GEOFFREY COX

"In an ideal position to see what happened"

well commanded formation. It is now vividly and clearly related by an officer who was in an ideal position to see what happened and how and why.

THIS great story is accurately told. I have noticed only three unimportant slips—on p. 42 "Fifteenth" German Army should be "Fourteenth," on p. 56 April 14 should be April 4, on p. 180 "6th Brigade" should be "9th Brigade"; I shall be glad if we can keep the Official Histories as clear of errors.

The accounts of the machinery of command and the manner in which battles are prepared and conducted are quite first class. Plenty of good descriptions of bombardments exist (and there are some impressive ones here), of scenes behind the line, of stricken fields when the battle had passed, of all the outward evidences of war. But it is not often that the actual working is shown, and to me this seemed the outstanding feature in the book. The patient scholarly collection and interpretation of intelligence-information regarding the enemy—the "Cabinet" conferences, probably peculiar in that form to the Division, the infinitely detailed planning and calculating required of every arm—the constant difficult making of decisions by commanders, these are excellently presented. The most experienced soldier will learn much from these brilliant studies.

I liked the sketches of personalities. The Division was not commanded or staffed by nonentities, and these sketches of good soldiers are true to the life. And it is made clear that above these strong and stubborn veterans General Freyberg was always the unquestioned master. The sketch of this great soldier is the fullest and best that has yet appeared and it reveals facets of his many-sided character that will surprise some readers. His drive, as powerful as ever after four gruelling years, his personal courage and firmness appear as expected, but great caution, infinite care for detail, incredible patience, tactical skill, wisdom and even

"low cunning" were attributes not always recognised. The book would not have suffered for an even fuller portrait.

GEOFFREY COX thinks well of the Italian partisans and makes a good case for them. My prejudices against Italians date from earlier days, but I am unwillingly convinced that some of them, at least, must have been braver and bolder and more useful than I find it easy to believe. Still I do not see that they played any very important part until it was timely to come to the succour of the conqueror.

The account of proceedings with the Yugoslavs in and about Trieste is authoritative, accurate, and important. It in itself is a most valuable contribution to history. But the Division was a self-sufficing body, and to me the great interest and value of this book lie in the study of that truly remarkable formation—its commanders, its men, and its methods. "There are few who served with the Division who will not carry its imprint on their personalities for the rest of their days. It had a life and being of its own which was shared in this war by few divisions . . . We were a segment of New Zealand life transplanted overseas."

There is much more I could say and point out; probably I have missed many of the best things. It may, however, be gathered from these remarks that I think

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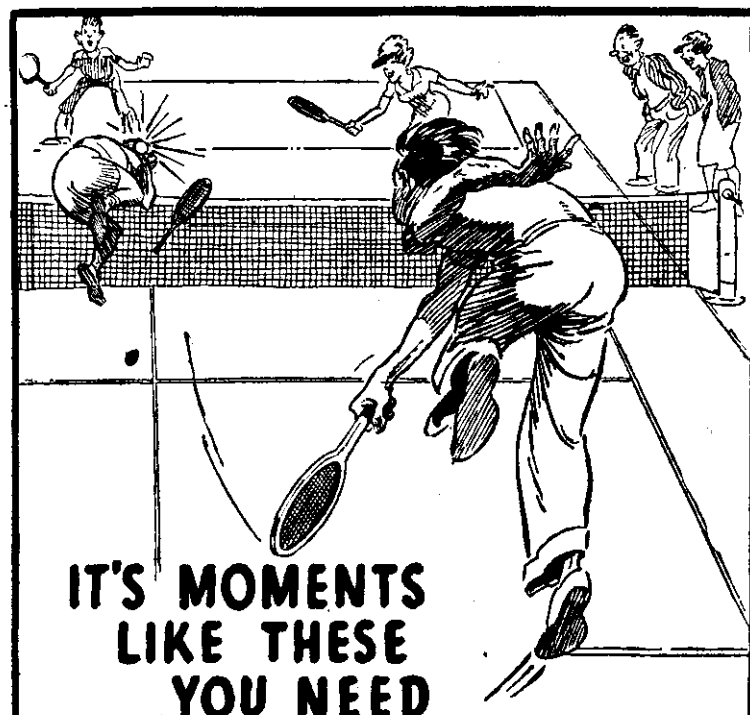
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