BOOK REVIEW:

Right man, right place, worst time: Commander Eric Feldt, his life and his coastwatchers

by Betty Lee

This is a biography of an Australian hero of the Pacific War, Commander Eric Augustas Feldt, OBE, RAN. Feldt's diverse experiences qualified him superbly for the challenge of setting up and maintaining a coast watch service in the critical early period of the Pacific War.

The author is a retired medical practitioner and great niece of her subject. She is well qualified to make observations about the effects of health on human performance under pressure. The tragic early loss of Royal Australian Naval College (RANC) classmates from accidents and illness affected Feldt, who suffered indifferent health for most of his life.

Lee's account makes clear why Feldt was the 'right man' when required to step up. He was able to work productively with each Australian military service, government officials, civilian expatriates, locals and United States (U.S.) forces. He used his invaluable contacts with his former RANC classmates and could draw on his skills in small-boat handling at crucial times. The author chronicles Feldt's useful life before and after World War II, completing the story of a great Australian. I feel this volume is comparable to Albert Facey's autobiography1. Both men endured the same critical events in Australia's journey.

Feldt was a remarkable man who made his own choices. This biography provides compelling accounts of late 19th century life in tropical Queensland, the involvement of labour from the Pacific Islands in the canefields (blackbirding), the sequel to its abolition, the life of young midshipmen in Australian and British vessels in the Great War, and the relatively quiet nature the Royal Navy's activity during its latter part. The author chronicles Feldt's useful life before and after World War II, trying to fill the story of a great Australian. I feel this volume is comparable to Albert Facey's autobiography1. Both men endured the same critical events in Australia's journey.

Feldt was an austere and modest man who acknowledges his wife for nursing him back to health and putting up with him while he wrote. But he does not mention her name nor any other family. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) but, arguably, deserved greater recognition. There is a memorial Lighthouse to the coastwatchers at Madang, Papua New Guinea, but nothing in this country. Lee's call for a memorial is attributed to Feldt's book5.

Dr Lee draws comprehensively on Feldt's book, but that book is focused on the war years and contains nothing of his life before or after World War II. So, her new contributions fill an important gap in the record. Feldt was an austere and modest man who acknowledges his wife for nursing him back to health and putting up with him while he wrote. But he does not mention her name nor any other family. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) but, arguably, deserved greater recognition. There is a memorial Lighthouse to the coastwatchers at Madang, Papua New Guinea, but nothing in this country. Lee's call for a memorial in Australia is well justified.

Lee's book contains many well-captioned photos, useful maps, a bibliography, endnotes and a very helpful index. It is an invaluable record of Feldt's unique life and the environments he was shaped by and that he helped reshape.

Ken Broadhead