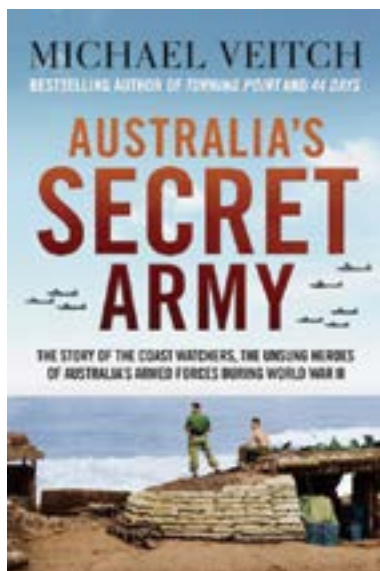


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Australia's Secret Army

By Michael Veitch

Hachette Australia

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Reviewed by Kaye De Petro,

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A Coastwatcher's work is ... to sit in hiding like a spider, right in the web of the enemy, unseen and unheard. We became the eyes and ears of the Pacific.

Reg Evans, Coastwatcher

From the very start of this book the reader is hooked by this story of the brave Australian Coastwatchers during World War II. In his prologue, Michael Veitch manages to paint a vivid picture of the end of the time of the 'Sahibs' and 'Memsahibs' in Tulagi, the British capital of the Solomon Islands. The very real fear of the planters and their wives, the sudden appearance of their saviours,

and the Australian soldiers, who run roughshod over their sensibilities as they are forced to leave their belongings behind is painted vividly. Then there is the appearance of a single arriving passenger amid all this chaos: 'Martin Clemens, Coastwatcher had arrived for work'.

Even the title is thrilling: *Australia's Secret Army*. Australia had a secret army? Who, what, how and why? Why don't we all know about it? Our questions are soon answered by the subtitle: the story of the coastwatchers, the unsung heroes of Australia's armed forces during World War II. But doesn't Veitch mean the Coast Guard? We have all heard of them, but who are these Coastwatchers he is talking about? By now our interest is well and truly piqued and we continue to Chapter One to find out more. And what a yarn Veitch has to tell us!

After World War I, Captain Chapman James Clare, Australia's second highest ranking officer in the nascent Australian navy, became concerned about the inability of Australia's armed forces to credibly protect Australia's vast coastline of more than 30,000 kilometres from hostile powers coming from the north. Unfortunately, the Australian navy did not have the funds or personnel to 'resource a national early warning system of its own'.

Clare came up with the ingenious idea to utilise the human resources already in situ around Australia's coast—the postmasters, harbour masters, cattle station owners, prospectors and missionaries who already lived in these remote areas. His plan was met with great enthusiasm by all three of Australia's armed services (army, air force and navy), and eventually the Coastwatchers service was

formed under the aegis of the Naval Intelligence Division.

Clare, who could see the threat of World War II looming, then expanded the scheme into New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, recruiting civil servants, missionaries and plantation owners to the cause. This book is primarily about these brave men (and a few women) during World War II.

As Clare passed away in 1940, he never learnt of the great success of his Coastwatchers, who through their bravery, patriotism and local knowledge of the islands to the north of Australia helped change the course of the war in the Pacific in the Allies' favour. To the American soldiers, marines and sailors who fought these battles, the Coastwatchers took on an almost mythical quality as they gave forewarning of many Japanese attacks and saved many lives in doing so.

The Coastwatchers were not paid to do this task but were eventually given military rank in the forlorn hope that the Japanese would treat them more kindly if they were officers—and to give their wives and children a pension in case of their death. They did their job brilliantly, often in conditions of great privation, under constant threat of capture, torture and death at the hands of the Japanese invaders, with some brave Coastwatchers losing their lives.

The book is meticulously researched but is written with a verve and style that soon has the reader turning pages avidly, wanting to read more about this secret army that helped save Australia from the impending doom of the Japanese invaders.