



"ONE HELL OF A LIFE" REVIEWED

Adrian Gilbert

The author of "*One Hell of a Life*", Captain Blackford has written a beautifully textured and intriguing book about his experiences in the Indian Army during the Second World War. What makes this book particularly interesting to readers interested in the Anglo-Indian situation is that Captain Blackford is a self-proclaimed Anglo-Indian and as a result brings a special perspective to life in India just before and during the Second World War.

Captain Blackford writes at length about his middle class upbringing in India before he joined the Indian Army. He discusses his schooling at the Christian Brothers School in Asansol where he failed painfully and his eventual move to a Jesuit run school in Calcutta where he became dux of his class.

Another facet of the book is the use of many Anglo-Indian words and phrases that are hybrids of English and various Indian languages. Words such as buddhu (stupid) and phrases such as whiskey and pani (water) are to be found all the way through the book and help to take the reader back into Captain Blackford's Anglo-Indian world.

The author really comes into his own when describing his war experiences that begin with the Japanese bombing of Calcutta and the impact this had on the morale of the civilian population. The war with the Japanese led to a severe shortage of food in Bengal and the eventual starving of hundreds of thousands of Indians. This was also a period of political ferment in India with many Indians using terrorism to try and achieve independence from Britain with many Indians keen to help the Japanese defeat the British in India.

Stan Blackford's introduction to the army and training to be a soldier was something that he found interesting and exciting with him being put in charge of his unit. Blackford's description of much of his army training has a touch of the boys own manuals that used to be so popular with boys and young men and represents a view that has become unfashionable in recent decades, still positive attitudes towards military action may be on the way back with the recent adventures of the US in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Captain Blackford's first posting was to the Northwest Frontier adjoining Afghanistan. He describes in great detail the different ethno-linguistic groups that were recruited by the British to fight for the empire. Many Australians believe that 'multi-culturalism' is a relatively new development but in India it's a practice that has been operating for hundreds of years, Stan discusses the problems involved in dealing with Hindu, Muslim and other troops due to their different culinary needs.

In between his military adventures Stan has the mandatory 'shoot' where he went hunting for a panther that had been killing the local village goats. The shoot turns out to be a series of misadventures that have a happy ending in that the leopard is killed without any of the hunters suffering any injuries. After this salutary experience Stan swore off going hunting ever again.

Captain Blackford concludes his fascinating biography with his decision to move to Adelaide, Australia where his story unfortunately concludes. I'm sure there are plenty of interesting experiences that Stan could write about in Australia. Overall '*One Hell of A Life*' is an excellent autobiography that would be enjoyed by most readers for its amusing stories and carefully painted pictures of Anglo-Indian India.

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