

Books

# Journey into hell re-lived

■ The only survivor of a tragic mission towards the end of World War II has finally told his story. The result is a book as thrilling as it is important.

**Michael Jacobson** reports

**L**ike many returned soldiers, Mick Dennis rarely talked about his World War II experience.

According to Mick's nephew Don, a Gold Coast writer and himself an army veteran who served in Vietnam – interestingly, Don's son Jamie is a rifleman with the 2nd Battalion currently serving in Iraq – it took years for his uncle's stories to emerge, and even then it was clear he was keeping plenty to himself.

One story, however, clearly outranked all the others and it has inspired a fine book about a remarkable mission undertaken towards the end of the war.

Don Dennis has done his uncle and his comrades proud in *The Guns of Muschu*, which takes the reader back to April, 1945, when eight Australian Z Special Force commandos – Mick Dennis among them – landed on Japanese-held Muschu Island, off the coast of New Guinea.

Captured by the Japanese in 1942, Muschu was used as a food growing and collection area and was heavily fortified.

Ordered to observe the island's defences and in particular confirm the strategic placement of two concealed naval guns, the Australians' mission went awry when their presence was discovered shortly after making landfall.

With no avenue of escape, what ensued was a journey into hell during which Muschu became a killing field. Nine days later, a single survivor – Mick Dennis – swam from Muschu to the New Guinea mainland, confronting the cold, currents, squalls, fatigue and, of course, sharks.

Writes Don Dennis: "Still the shapes swam past him, below him, around him. It took every ounce of strength to keep going, making one stroke after another."

Mick says that he forced himself to keep swimming, reckoning that being killed by sharks would be far preferable

to his fate should he be discovered by the Japanese. Incredibly, he made it ashore and began to make his way through the Japanese lines to safety.

Based on diaries held by the Dennis family since the war, as well as extensive research and interviews with Australian and Japanese veterans, *The Guns of Muschu* recounts an authentic adventure and a true tragedy.

"This mission had never really been written about in much depth and Mick's a modest bloke anyway. For a long time he was reluctant to talk too much about it," says Don Dennis.

"Some things are just too hard to explain to people even when you want to. What Mick went through, how can you convey that to someone who has never known anything like it?"

"Perhaps that's why he felt he could talk to me, because I had served in the army and there had been times when my own life was in danger.

"We could talk in simple terms, use jargon we both understood. Even so, it was a gradual build-up over 20 years for the story of Muschu to come out."

Don believes his uncle may also have suffered from what is known as survivor's guilt.

"Some comrades were tortured before they were killed, that much is pretty clear," says Don.

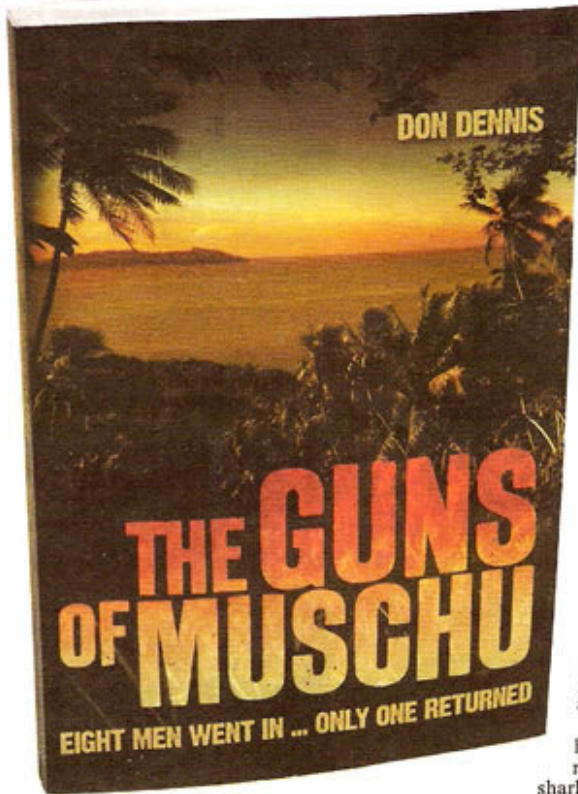
"That's a hard thing to carry with you as a survivor. Also, it's a difficult thing to adapt back to civilian life after being a soldier.

"One day you're making life and death decisions under fire, the next you're in an office making decisions about what kind of paper clips you should buy.

"There's a sense of being let down by civil life and I think Mick felt that. Talking about the war might have exacerbated that feeling."

However, difficult as it must have been for Mick Dennis, it is to the readers' benefit that he did talk about the tragedy on Muschu.

His memories have made *The Guns of Muschu* an important historical document as well as a very human story of courage, sacrifice, resourcefulness, luck, sadness and recovery.



<b>TITLE:</b>	The Guns of Muschu
<b>AUTHOR-PUBLISHER:</b>	Don Dennis-Allen & Urwin
<b>AVAILABLE:</b>	All good bookstores
<b>PRICE:</b>	rrp \$29.95
<b>IN A WORD:</b>	Powerful