

Spice Islands Forts; An Illustrated History and Catalogue: By Simon Pratt. PB, 305pp. 20.3 x 1.9 x 25.4cm. ISBN 978.1.922440.94.5. £39.00, Published by MoshPit Publishing, 2020. [It's printed to order by Amazon in Britain so only takes a few days to arrive.]

The book starts with a timeline BC to 194, which sets the scene; there follows a map to locate the area, which is north of Timor/Northern Australia and south of the Philippines, the islands, of which there are hundreds, being in the Banda Sea. Our particular interest is with the volcanic islands Ternate and Tidore (cloves) in the Moluccas, Ambon and the Lease Islands, and the Banda Islands. Most unusually, Ternate and Tidore were totally given over to clove production, all food and supplies had to be imported.

There follows a description of the Spice Islands trade – cloves, mace and nutmeg, the last two only found in the Banda Islands. The story of how the Islands were first located, by Portugal, followed gradually by others, and how the Islands slowly began to appear on the maps of the time, is fascinating.

Who controls the trade makes a fortune; Portuguese, Spanish, the British briefly, and finally the Dutch, who for several hundred years enjoyed sole benefit of the Islands' produce. The value of the spices was so great that an expedition halfway around the world and losing four out of five of its ships, was still able to return an astonishing profit.

All these countries needed to defend their trade, and all built forts, lots of them, usually located to control landing sites and gaps in the encircling reefs.

Over the next 100 pages, we find the history of the islands from early days to 2002. In pre-colonial times up to 1512 the Islands were separate kingdoms under a sultan, continuously at war with each other.

The Portuguese turned up in 1512 with their fleets, from the west around Africa and Magellan from the east across the Pacific. The era of conflict followed from 1575-1663 when the Europeans fought over the area, a conflict eventually won by the Dutch in 1663. During the Dutch supremacy (1663-1942) there were more Anglo-Dutch wars in different places around Europe. After 1942 the book traces the modern battlegrounds (1942-2002) – WW2 and post-War chaos.

The next chapter describes fortress warfare: the evolution of a specific indigenous style, pre-colonial fortifications, fortress construction and contemporary weaponry. A very significant segment is sea power, a vital adjunct to forts, which cannot survive without command of the sea; the European vessels were generally much heavier, with heavier armaments while the *korakora* of the Islanders

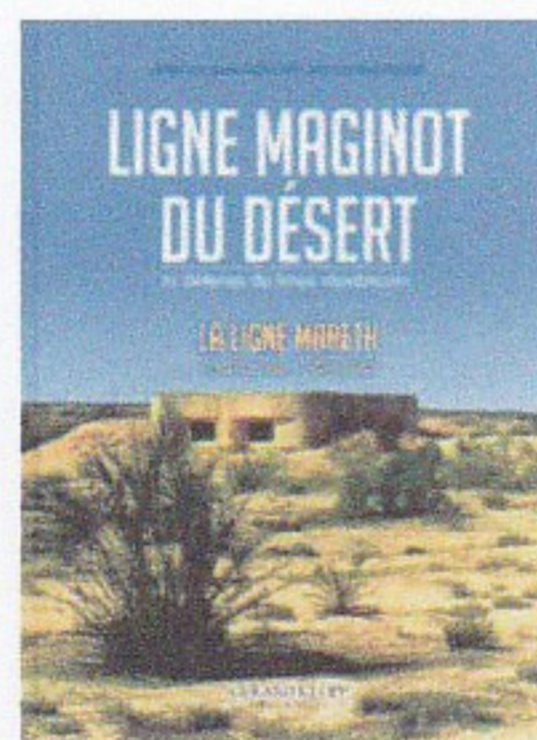
were small galleys, outriggers, two decks, the upper for fighting men, and oar and sail propelled. Much weaker – but there were a *lot* of them. Swivel guns were by far the most numerous weapons arming the forts. Tactics and organisation are likewise described. For example, the ability of ships and forts to interact was a fundamental and vital part of the colonial strategy; cannon were key to colonial success; a quarter of a century after the Portuguese arrived in India there were 1073 artillery pieces mounted in the forts there.

The following section, of great interest to members, comprises an 85-page gazetteer describing the forts on the various islands, illustrated with an excellent selection of contemporary maps and plans, and photographs. Many of the forts are in poor condition, reduced by deliberate destruction, earthquakes (there are many, owing to the volcanic nature of the islands – some are almost entirely volcanoes), weather and enveloping jungles. The forts are divided amongst the islands where they are to be found, in the Moluccas, the Ambon area and the Banda Islands. For example, there are six Banda Islands with eight forts on them, for which we have a plan, several photographs and a description of their history and current condition.

The last part is a guide to visiting the islands and forts – for the visitor, one of these 'rough guides' would be very useful as many forts are deep in jungle, hard to find and get to, and many of the islands themselves are not easy to access. You need to know which of the forts are worth the effort to reach.

For Further Reading there is a three-page bibliography. I would recommend this very well-written book as it covers an area not previously covered in an English-language work, the result of very extensive research and travel, and includes the forts of all the colonial powers who fought over the bounty of the Islands. As such it is a pioneering work for this region and it is to be hoped other publications will cover the other islands, perhaps Java/Sumatra to start with.

Alan Bailey



Ligne Maginot du Desert: by Jean-Jacques Moulins and Michel Truttmann H/B, 219 pp, illustrated with colour, black and white photographs and maps ISBN: 2-911992-95-4 Published by Gerard Klopp (2018), €48

Well, Covid 19 is almost past, or so we are told, and no doubt many of us are turning our heads to planning a trip abroad next year. How about exploring Tunisia and the Mareth Line? The Mareth Line is the almost forgotten sibling of its big brother, the Maginot Line, and sometimes referred to as the southern Maginot Line, for those not in the know.

This book is a long-overdue study of the Mareth line both then and now and is richly illustrated with maps and photographs of the line in the 1930s and wartime and more recent pictures. The Line was not so different from its larger