

*Australian soldier John Hannan, advances on a Japanese position armed with a Bren gun*





# AUSTRALIA'S THIN GREEN LINE

WORDS LEIGH NEVILLE

In 1942 Australia stood on the brink of invasion by the Japanese. Its last line of defence: citizen soldiers willing to lay their lives on the line in the hellish conditions of the Kokoda Trail

**I**n Australian history, Kokoda ranks only behind Gallipoli in terms of cultural importance and its impact on the Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) myth. The name is invoked in much the same manner as the battle at Anzac Cove as a kind of short-hand for a uniquely Australian version of the fabled 'Blitz spirit', a signifier of Aussie mateship against extreme adversary.

Despite this, the name of the campaign remains a bone of contention. Historians still argue Kokoda Trail versus Kokoda Track; the former has gained the upper hand in modern usage, while the latter was more commonly used by the Diggers themselves and in battalion records. According to the Australian War Memorial, keepers of Australian military history, both are equally correct.

In the popular imagination, the campaign stopped a Japanese invasion of mainland Australia, but historians have since discovered that the Japanese had decided against any such attempt. They concluded that they could never realistically occupy a landmass of such immense size. In 1942, however, the threat of invasion was very real for the average Australian. Japanese submarine attacks in Sydney Harbour and air raids against Darwin

only added to that fear. One Kokoda veteran later explained; "We were fighting for Australia, on Australian soil for the first time (Papua was an Australian protectorate at the time). It was important that we won because if we didn't win who knows what would have happened."

## A mountainous task

The battles that formed the Kokoda Campaign ran from mid-July to mid-November 1942; four months of close combat with a fanatical enemy in some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world. The Trail was a series of native tracks that crossed the Owen Stanley Mountain Range in what is now Papua New Guinea, from Owen's Corner near the capital of Port Moresby through the hot, wet jungle to the villages of Uberi and Ioribaiwa, where the path begins to rise dramatically. This first section of the Trail ends in what soon became known to many young soldiers as the 'Golden Stairs' – 4,000 treacherously slippery steps that are cut into the mountainside.

From the 'Golden Stairs' the gruelling ascent continues to the village of Efogi, some 1,500 meters above sea level, and on to Myola, which would become an Australian forward base, at 2,000 metres in altitude. With each step, the

temperature falls and the air becomes thinner. The Trail then peaks at what became known as Templeton's Crossing, some 2,500 metres above sea level, before beginning to finally descend across Eora Creek and through the tiny villages of Eora, Alola, Isurava, and Kokoda.

At the beginning of the Kokoda Campaign, there were only two under-strength Australian brigades stationed in Moresby; both comprised of inexperienced and poorly equipped teenage militia of the Australian Military Force (AMF). 39 Battalion and the Papuan Infantry Battalion of the AMF had been eventually dispatched across the Owen Stanleys to counter the possibility of a Japanese landing on the north-east coast. The Japanese beat them to it and landed their first troops around dusk on 21 July 1942 – they would be the first of an eventual landing force of more than 14,000.

The Japanese planned a two-pronged attack to capture Port Moresby – one across the Owen Stanleys to encircle the capital from the north, and the other as a direct amphibious assault against Moresby. The latter was aborted following the Battle for the Coral Sea, which broke up much of the invasion fleet. Instead, the Japanese relied upon advancing along the Kokoda Trail to Moresby.

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*Although beautiful, the Kokoda Trail has some of the most inhospitable terrain on Earth*



It was while advancing along this route that the first battle of the campaign occurred, fittingly at the village of Kokoda itself. A small Australian force, from 39 Battalion of the AMF, had been airlifted to the village to conduct a reconnaissance toward Buna, the suspected site of the Japanese landings.

The Australian militia, led by Captain Sam Templeton, soon ran into the advancing Japanese forces of the South Seas Detachment and, severely outnumbered, carried out a number of harassing actions to impede the enemy advance. Templeton's men managed to ambush the first Japanese troops approaching the village at Oivi but the Australians were soon surrounded. Templeton himself set out to warn the main Australian force but was shot and killed crossing Eora Creek. This was soon to be the famous crossing, named in his honour.

Eventually, the surviving Diggers fell back to Kokoda, but the Japanese captured the village on 29 July. Just 79 men briefly recaptured Kokoda on 9 August, before being counterattacked and driven away by around 1,500 Japanese, retreating to the village of Deniki and then Isurava, the next village down the Trail. It was here that the Australians were ordered to dig in and await reinforcement. The 39 Battalion soldiers were soon outnumbered by as many as ten to one, but Isurava was well placed with good fields of fire over the surrounding valley.

The first regular Australian Imperial Force (AIF) units to enter the campaign were sent to relieve these beleaguered militia soldiers, but the first two battalions were forced to stop short at Myola, after running out of rations. The men of 39 Battalion were just about holding on in Isurava, their uniforms and boots

**“THERE WERE CLUMPS OF JAPS HERE AND THERE AND HE JUST MOWED THEM DOWN. HE JUST WENT STRAIGHT INTO 'EM AS IF BULLETS DIDN'T MEAN A THING...”**

literally falling apart and in dire need of food and ammunition. Their commander described them as; “worn out by strenuous fighting and exhausting movement, and weakened by lack of food and sleep and shelter.” Despite this, they fought on. A veteran remembered; “We had to stay there – fight till death. And that was a bit horrifying. I thought, ‘Well I won’t see my family again. I won’t see Australia again.’ But I was prepared, like the rest of us, to stay there and fight to the finish.”

On 26 August, the Japanese attacked Isurava again, pushing the beleaguered defenders to their limits. AIF troops were beginning to arrive to the fight by this time, but so were Japanese reinforcements. The bitter fighting would continue for three days as the Australians were forced to again withdraw having suffered heavy casualties, principally from a well-positioned Japanese mountain gun.

It was on 29 August that one member of the AIF, Private Bruce Kingsbury, made a desperate charge at an enemy position. One of his mates saw what happened; “He came forward with this Bren (light machine gun) and he just mowed them down and he was an inspiration to

everybody else around him. There were clumps of Japs here and there and he just mowed them down. He just went straight into 'em as if bullets didn't mean a thing... This Jap just appeared above the rock and fired one shot and vanished straight away. And I looked down and I saw Bruce and I grabbed him and took him up to Doc Duffy, to the RAP [Regimental Aid Post], but he was dead when he hit the ground”. Kingsbury was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

After a second attack, during the night of 29 August, 39 Battalion and the reinforcements of the AIF slipped out of the village and withdrew to Eora Creek. Both the militia and AIF units had now suffered over 50 per cent casualties. At Templeton's Crossing, the starving men, described as ‘gaunt scarecrows’ by one medic, received their first hot meal in many weeks – a bully beef stew.

Relentless Japanese attacks, often supported by the mountain guns and mortars, saw the Australians forced to retreat even further south through their former base at Myola to the village of Efogi. Here they were reinforced by a fresh AIF battalion and the survivors of 39 Battalion were finally sent back to Moresby. Along the way, the Diggers continually harassed and slowed their enemy with ambushes and grim fighting withdrawals, making the Japanese pay for every inch of ground. The Japanese attacks continued and, despite reinforcement by two further battalions, the Diggers fell back to Ioribaiwa Ridge, less than 50 kilometres from Moresby itself..

### Fate plays its role

While the Kokoda Campaign was being waged in Papua, the US Marines had conducted a



*With vehicles being almost useless on the Trail, the Australians had to rely on airborne supplies or what they could carry themselves*



**1 28-29 JULY**  
The Australian AMF first contact the advance elements of the Japanese South Seas Detachment. Despite being hugely outnumbered, the Australians manage to convince the Japanese that they were ten times their actual size.

**2 8-9 AUGUST**  
The village of Kokoda is fought over, lost by the Australians and then abandoned by the Japanese only to be briefly recaptured by the Australians. The village fall to the Japanese again on 9 August.

**3 26-30 AUGUST**  
The AMF defends Isurava against repeated Japanese attacks. Despite AIF reinforcement, the Australians are forced to withdraw. The commander of the AIF is captured and executed by the Japanese.

**4 31 AUGUST-5 SEPTEMBER**  
Continual Japanese attacks see the beleaguered Australians retreat through Eora and their former base of operations at Myola. This is the most dangerous stage of the campaign and the closest the Japanese came to winning.

**5 6-9 SEPTEMBER**  
With 39 Battalion dispatched back to Moresby, Efogi is reinforced by fresh AIF troops. Despite this they are almost encircled by the Japanese and narrowly manage to escape with heavy casualties.

**6 14-16 SEPTEMBER**  
The survivors of the battle of Efogi prepare for the final defence of Port Moresby at Ioribaiwa Ridge. They fight the Japanese to a stalemate. Unable to sustain operations, the Japanese begin to pull back.



**7 12 OCTOBER**  
AIF reinforcements advance after the retreating Japanese, making contact at Myola Ridge where the Japanese hold up the Australian advance for three days before slipping away under the cover of night.

**8 13-27 OCTOBER**  
Australian forces attack prepared Japanese defences at Eora Creek and neighbouring village. After a costly battle the Japanese are defeated and conduct a fighting retreat from the Owen Stanley Range.

**9 2 NOVEMBER**  
Australian forces enter the village of Kokoda without a shot being fired. Nonetheless it is both a morale boosting victory and a strategic one with a forward airfield now in Australian control.

**10 NOVEMBER 1942- JANUARY 1943**  
Although the Kokoda Trail had been recaptured, three months of combat operations ensue until the last Japanese forces are destroyed or captured at their initial landing site of Buna on the north-east coast.

# TRAIL OF DEATH

KOKODA PROVED AS MUCH A RESILIENT ENEMY AS THE JAPANESE. EACH DAY THE AUSTRALIANS HAD TO FIGHT ANOTHER WAR: AGAINST THE TERRAIN ITSELF

Papua offered some of the hardest territory over which to fight a war. The region's tropical climate had an average annual rainfall of over 250 centimetres. These monsoonal downpours meant that a creek could become a raging river within an hour. In the mountains, which form the 'spine' of the country and the site for the famous battles at Templeton's Crossing, it was both cold and wet. At lower altitudes it was simply hot and wet.

The terrain of the Trail itself varied from treacherous ridge lines to valleys filled with Kunai grass and virtually impenetrable primary rainforest. It had a significant affect on the fighting. Visibility was very restricted meaning that most contacts with the enemy were at comparatively short range. Sub-machine guns and grenades were particularly favoured for this reason.

Any advance was slowed to a snail's pace as the Trail rapidly turned to sometimes knee-deep mud. The soldiers themselves were constantly wet and could never properly wash and dry their clothing or boots, contributing to dysentery and other illnesses. They were also constantly plagued by malaria-carrying mosquitos. In short it was, as once famously described by a Digger, "a bastard of a place".

*Right: Papuan native porters evacuating a seriously wounded Australian soldier along the Kokoda Trail. Note the incline, mud and oppressive jungle*

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*Illustration: Rebekka Hearl*



massive amphibious landing at Guadalcanal. If the Americans were able to capture the airstrip, they would have a stepping stone against the chain of Japanese held islands in the Pacific. For the Japanese, the advance against the Australians in Papua was taking too long against stiff resistance and commanders were nervous about over-committing to the capture of Moresby, especially while the US Marines fought back a major Japanese counter-attack on Guadalcanal. The enemy forces had finite resources (they had set out from Buna along the Trail with enough rations and water for only 12 days) and, with an already dangerously over-extended supply train, the decision was made to focus on defeating the Marine landings.

Late in September, the Japanese were forced to postpone their ambitions toward Port Moresby and instead were forced to conduct a withdrawal themselves, north along the Trail back to the village of Eora. As no Japanese term existed for 'retreat', the order instead called for an 'advance to the rear'. The delaying tactics employed by the Australians had paid off, slowing their enemy's advance until it was no longer a viable option. The Diggers had turned the tide – now they were the attackers.

Fresh AIF troops advanced back up the Trail, reaching Menari without contacting the enemy. On 12 October, the advancing Australians made contact with the retreating Japanese at

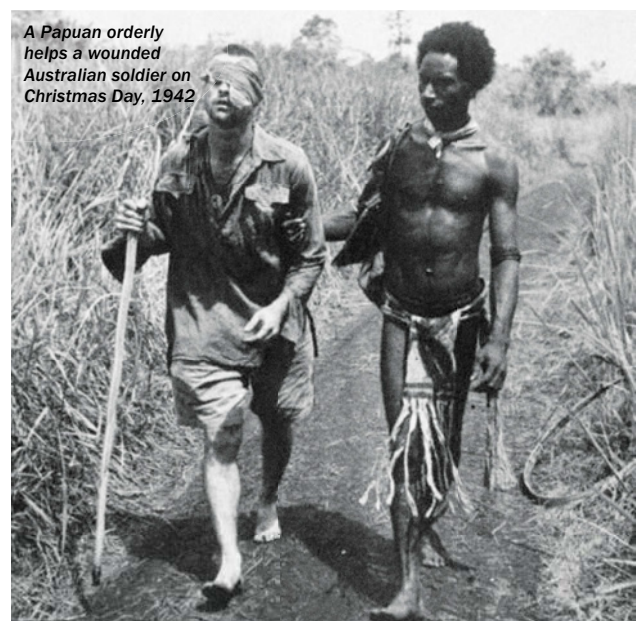
the battle of Myola Ridge, eventually flanking three Japanese detachments arrayed across the Trail.

The Australian troops pushed forward steadily, sending out reconnaissance parties to scout out the Japanese defences. As one veteran described it: "I'll never forget the first time I was forward scout... You were very lucky to survive, so you had a certain time [working as a scout], then somebody else took over, see. And you couldn't do anything, you only walked up the track. You were the bloke they were going to shoot at. Then you'd know there were Japs there."

The withdrawing Japanese 144 Regiment had been ordered to retreat to Eora Creek and construct defensive positions on the eastern slopes of the Track, south of Eora. These overlooked the natural barrier of the creek. The Japanese infantry were well supported by their own artillery, positioned to fire down the incline upon advancing Australian forces at a highly lethal angle.

Despite their well-sited positions and on-call artillery support, the Japanese defenders also faced a number of difficult challenges of their own. Their commander had been recently replaced as he was required to attend a promotion exam back in Japan, precisely when the now demoralised troops needed continuity and a steady hand. They were also

**"A WEEK-LONG BATTLE ENSUED AT TEMPLETON'S CROSSING AND INTO EORA ITSELF. MORE THAN 50 DIGGERS WERE KILLED IN ACTION AND OVER 130 WERE WOUNDED DURING THIS TENACIOUS CLASH"**



*A Papuan orderly helps a wounded Australian soldier on Christmas Day, 1942*



*These shells were carried the entire length of the Trail by the Japanese*

## THE 'CHOCOS' GO TO WAR

**A CONSCRIPT ARMY OF AUSTRALIAN MILITIA WAS DISPATCHED TO STOP THE JAPANESE ADVANCE – THE FAMOUS 'CHOCOS' OF THE AMF**

As a member of the Commonwealth, and the second nation to follow Great Britain in declaring war against Germany in 1939, Australia had dispatched the majority of its small volunteer army,

known as the AIF or Australian Imperial Force, overseas in 1940-41.

While the AIF famously fought in Greece and North Africa, it was left largely to the conscripted

militia, more officially known as the Australian Military Force (AMF), to defend the Australian territory and possessions.

The AMF was at the time composed of some 130,000 conscripts, most with little to no military experience. Initially, these men were, by law, to be used strictly for the defence of Australia and could not be dispatched overseas like the AIF. In reaction to Japan's lightning fast advance through Papua and with a distinct lack of regular troops available, the first AMF were sent to defend what was, at the time, officially Australian soil.

At best, these militia soldiers were given a month's worth of rudimentary training before they were sent to the jungles of Papua. The men averaged 18 years of age and were noticeably poorly equipped to face the Japanese. They were disparagingly called 'Chocos' by the regular AIF, arguing that the 'chocolate soldiers' of the AMF would melt in the sun (or in the heat of battle).

Others jokingly called them 'Koalas' after the famous native Australian marsupial – not to be exported or shot at! Remarkably, the term 'Choco' or 'Choc' remained within Australian military vernacular through Vietnam and is even in use today to denote Reserve soldiers.

*Members of the 39th Battalion on parade after weeks of intense fighting*







*Australian gunners pose beside a captured Japanese artillery piece*

perilously low on rations; Australian troops later reported that there was evidence that many of the Japanese soldiers had been subsisting on grass, tree bark and plant roots. Ammunition was also dwindling.

A week-long battle ensued at Templeton's Crossing and into Eora itself. More than 50 Diggers were killed in action and over 130 were wounded during this tenacious clash. With ammunition, rations and rested troops, the Australians eventually overcame but not without heavy losses. A platoon commander remembered being fired upon by the Japanese mountain guns: "I had to stay at one stage above Eora Creek and the gun was firing... Every time he fired it, he fired it down the track and it hit somebody... That was probably the biggest test of ordinary personal courage that I ever had to undergo. And I don't want to undergo it again."

## **"DESPITE NOT CONTACTING A SINGLE ENEMY, THE AMERICAN UNIT TOOK AN ASTOUNDING 42 DAYS TO CROSS THE OWEN STANLEYS"**

The enemy were now in full retreat, pulling back and leaving Kokoda undefended. A Digger wrote that the capture of the village of Kokoda on 2 November, nonetheless, was a significant morale boost for the Australians: "It meant so much. The aerodrome was ours, and that meant we would get better tucker [food] and comforts would come in." Disturbingly, the Japanese left their badly wounded behind: "We gave them grenades and we gave them instructions: 'When the enemy comes, you must throw the first grenade at the enemy and kill yourselves with the second grenade.' And then we left them there and we crossed the river. This is one of my worst memories of the war," recalled one Japanese officer.

### **The end of the beginning?**

The Diggers had won the battle of the Kokoda Track, but three months of further brutal

combat awaited them as they fought the remnants of the South Seas Detachment. In November, the Diggers, accompanied by American Army units, reached Buna and Gona on the north-east coast, the site of the original Japanese landings. In fact, despite American General Douglas MacArthur's protestations, the arrival of the first American unit in Papua forced him to belatedly recognise the resilience of the Australians and the AMF in particular. MacArthur had been a vocal critic of the Australians for much of the campaign.

An infantry battalion from the American 126th Regiment had arrived and were dispatched up a parallel trail known as the Kapa Kapa Trail. Despite not contacting a single enemy, the American unit took an astounding 42 days to cross the Owen Stanleys and the exhausted men – ridden with dysentery and malaria like the Australian forces – were classed as combat ineffective for a number of months afterward.

The Kokoda Campaign had been a war against the effects of disease and malnourishment as much as against the Imperial Japanese Army. A minimum of ten per



cent of a unit's fighting strength was typically stricken with jungle diseases at any one time. Chief among these was dysentery caused by the appalling conditions and diet along with a lack of medical supplies to treat the condition.

Casualties from the fighting and from jungle disease and malnutrition on both sides were often evacuated by native porters. Papuans working for the Australians were known affectionately, in the admittedly racist language of the time, as the 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels'. The Australian Air Force was supposed to fly casualties out from Myola but refused to do so, arguing it placed their aircraft at too great a risk. Instead, the wounded were carried out by the Papuans. The Japanese forces treated the Papuan natives rather more brutally and as little more than slave labour – many died or were executed after they themselves fell ill through overwork.

Resupply was the other key factor affecting combat performance in the jungles of Papua. For the Australians, the closest resupply was anywhere up to 160 kilometres away in Moresby. Everything had to be carried in on the backs of Diggers, Papuan porters and pack animals or dropped from the air, a very unreliable procedure that saw many pallets disappear into the jungle. Food and ammunition were often scarce and both had to be conserved where possible. The author's own grandfather, then Lance Corporal Edward Farrelly, fought on the Track, and recalls routinely having less than two full magazines for his Thompson sub-machine gun. The Diggers, like soldiers in any war, were also often saddled with gear that wasn't fit for the unique environment they found themselves in.

For example, Farrelly recalls carrying a .55 Boys anti-tank rifle, only a trifling 16 kilograms

(unloaded) in the sweltering scrub. It was useless due to the distinct lack of Japanese armour on the Track, something even a cursory examination of a map would have identified – it was hardly tank country. Apparently that particular Boys disappeared down a steep gully in an unfortunate 'accident'. Other weapons, like the Vickers medium machine gun that could have been decisive in the early battles on the Track, were inexplicably ordered to be left behind as they were thought to be too heavy to manoeuvre in the dense terrain.

The fighting was tough and often at close range with the Japanese typically preferring death rather than face capture and dishonour. An Australian veteran remembered the actions of one Japanese officer: "One of the [most] extraordinary sights I've ever seen, [was] when we encircled these Japs so we could capture the position and kill them all... A Japanese officer raced out with his sword, drawn sword, samurai sword, and one of our lieutenants grappled with him, and his weapon jammed.

"Just luck of the game, you know, it happens in every battle I suppose. And they grappled together and any rate, someone else came up, one of our chaps, and shot this Japanese who

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*Soldiers of the 7th Division use horses to drag a 25 pounder gun into position over the Owen Stanley Ridge*



**“THEY ARE BEAUTS AT GETTING UP THE COCONUT TREES AND SNIPING. THEY SEEM TO BE EVERYWHERE, AND I’LL BE BLOWED IF I CAN SEE THEM”**

had so gallantly and bravely raced towards us waving his sword, you know, extraordinary sight, you wouldn’t think you would see it in this 1942 war would you?”

In common with the later island-hopping campaigns in the Pacific, Kokoda was an exceptionally vicious operation in which no quarter was given by either side. Tales of Japanese atrocities only fuelled the ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ nature of the fight, where the taking of prisoners was an unusual occurrence. The Japanese also proved a skilful opponent, devising tactics to match the unique terrain. Another Digger wrote: “They are beauts at getting up the coconut trees and sniping. They seem to be everywhere, and I’ll be blown

if I can see them. I don’t know how they get up those coconut trees. I can’t climb them stripped, yet they can take a machine gun up one.”

Despite this ferocious opposition, disease, the lack of food and water and the jungle itself, the Australians were triumphant. Kokoda became the first time the Japanese were soundly defeated and, it was felt at the time by a grateful nation, the end of the spectre of invasion. General Sir William Slim commented after the war: “It was the Australians... who broke the spell of Japanese invincibility on land and inflicted on that arrogant army its first defeat.”

Japanese casualties are unknown but are believed to number in the thousands. Over 1,600 Australian servicemen were wounded in action on the Trail, and 625 made the ultimate sacrifice in combat. They lost many more to malaria, dysentery and dengue fever. The former CO of the famous 39th Battalion, the late Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Honner, summed up the feelings of many when he said: “They died so young. They missed so much. They gave up so much; their dreams; their loved ones; they laid down their lives so that their friends might live. Greater love hath no man than this.”



*It is said that the native Papuans never left a wounded man behind, even in heavy combat*



*Left: Members of D Company, 39th Battalion, return to base camp after a battle at Isurava*



*These damp, humid conditions were the perfect breeding ground for tropical diseases*

**UP CLOSE & PERSONAL**

THE SMALL ARMS EACH SIDE WIELDED IN THE CRAMPED JUNGLE CONDITIONS

**JAPANESE ARMS**

**TYPE 38 RIFLE**

**CLIP CAPACITY: 5 RATE OF FIRE: 15 RPM**

Compared to most Japanese small arms, the bolt action Type 38 was a decent service rifle. Its 6.5mm round produced less recoil and muzzle flash than the standard Australian .303.



**TYPE 92 MEDIUM MACHINE GUN**

**CLIP CAPACITY: 30 RATE OF FIRE: 450 RPM**

The Japanese medium machine gun, the Type 92 was an unusual design fed from 30 round stripper clips. Diggers nicknamed it the Woodpecker thanks to its slow and steady rate of fire.



**AUSTRALIAN ARMS**

**BREN LIGHT MACHINE GUN**

**CLIP CAPACITY: 30 RATE OF FIRE: 500 RPM**

The Bren light machine gun was accurate, comparatively light, and superbly reliable. The British design fired a .303 round (the same calibre as the Enfield rifle) from a top-mounted 30 round magazine.



**OWEN MACHINE CARBINE**

**CLIP CAPACITY: 33 RATE OF FIRE: 700 RPM**

The Owen sub-machine gun was an Australian designed replacement for the American Thompson. It first saw action in the closing stages of the Kokoda campaign where its light weight was prized.

