

AUSTRALIANS AT WAR – THE THIN KHAKI LINE

PART 1

This clip uses black-and-white archival footage, photographs, music and interviews to re-create a series of events in 1942 in which Japanese troops were prevented from advancing along the Kokoda Track to Port Moresby. An image of a map opens the sequence and a narrator explains the events. Footage shows Mustang aeroplanes and Australian Imperial Force (AIF) troops who resisted the Japanese landing forces. The clip includes interviews with two Australians who took part. Footage of AIF troops marching and images of dead Japanese soldiers are shown.

Educational value points

- The clip tells the story of two important episodes in the war in the Pacific during the Second World War. With their defeat at Milne Bay in late August and early September 1942 and their reversal on the Kokoda Track a few weeks later, the seemingly unstoppable Japanese were halted and so were their hopes of taking Port Moresby. A quarter of the Japanese force died at Milne Bay. It is estimated that more than 7,000 Japanese were killed in the Kokoda campaign.
- The clip shows a key event in Australia's history at a time when the nation was threatened by the possibility of Japanese invasion. From December 1941, when Japanese troops began their invasion of Malaya, their advance southwards seemed unstoppable. Rabaul, the capital of the then Australian Mandated Territory of New Guinea, fell on 23 January 1942, followed by Ambon, Timor, Singapore and Java. In May and June Japan attacked Australia by air and sea.
- The dramatic re-creation of this important event in Australia's wartime history does not convey how close the conflict came to being a defeat for Australia. Initially, undertrained Australian and Papuan forces faced the massive forces of the Japanese. Even when reinforcements arrived the Australians could not prevent the Japanese advance but their constant attacks put severe pressure on Japanese supply lines. In mid-September the Japanese began to withdraw.
- The clip shows Australian conscripts fighting in New Guinea in the Second World War, raising the issue of wartime conscription, significant in Australian political history. The First World War had seen the defeat of two referendums proposing conscription for overseas service. In 1939 the government of Robert Menzies had introduced compulsory military training for home defence. In 1943 prime minister Curtin extended the definition of 'home' to include the south-west Pacific.
- The clip tells of the militiamen, dubbed the 'chocolate soldiers' by the AIF, who showed extraordinary fortitude in their battle to prevent the Japanese advance along the Kokoda Track, giving the AIF time to arrive and regroup. These men, relieved by the AIF in August 1942, were troops from the Citizens Military Force (CMF), which was made up

mainly of men rejected for service in the AIF and conscripts who were ‘under-equipped, under-trained and mostly under 20’ (<http://ink.news.com.au>).

- Just as the ‘rats of Tobruk’ had symbolised Australian desert fighting, so the ill-equipped soldiers shown in the clip, who fought along the Kokoda Track across the Owen Stanley Ranges, became a symbol of jungle warfare. Both El Alamein and Kokoda have become icons of Australian military history just as Gallipoli was in the First World War, showing how Australian soldiers could endure against seemingly insurmountable odds and in appalling conditions.

PART 2

This clip shows, through staged and archival film footage, a map and interviews, preparations for and then the battle near El Alamein in 1942 that halted the German General Rommel’s advance on Cairo. A narrator tells of the involvement and competence of Australian troops, who are shown laying mines, advancing and fighting in desert warfare. Two veterans of the campaign describe the lead-up to and then the attack. Night scenes illustrate the ferocity of the artillery barrage which is described by an Australian fighter pilot who witnessed it from the air.

Educational value points

- The engagement at El Alamein, in which the Australian 9th Division took a leading role as part of the Allied British 8th Army, lasted from 23 October until 5 November 1942. The infantry made three determined attacks that drew Rommel’s Africa Corps to the north, allowing a breakthrough by the British tanks that halted Rommel’s advance into Egypt and the Suez Canal. The battle for El Alamein involved 230,000 Allied soldiers with 1,100 tanks against 80,000 men and 600 tanks.
- The massive predawn artillery bombardment that signalled the beginning of the battle is vividly depicted in the clip. The barrage began at 9.40 pm on 23 October 1942 and was provided by 880 guns trained on the fixed defences of the Germans, their field guns and tanks as well as their trenches, minefields and wire defences. This attacking fire created a ‘creeping barrage’, or curtain of protective fire, for the advance of Allied infantry and tanks.
- The Australian troops bore the brunt of Rommel’s armoured attack and suffered a high number of casualties at El Alamein. Australians made up only 10 per cent of the British 8th Army in the El Alamein campaign, but suffered 22 per cent of the casualties. Between July and the beginning of November 1942 the 9th Division suffered almost 6,000 casualties with more than 1,200 Australians killed. In the October campaign alone, 620 died.
- The clip employs a number of elements – music, staged and archival footage, sound effects, a narration and interviews – to present a dramatic depiction of the campaign. Music composed specifically for the film is mixed with rich sound effects to build tension and convey the drama of the battle scenes. Interviews with veterans of the campaign

provide eyewitness accounts and a narrator provides factual background and a concluding commentary.

- The Battle of El Alamein helped confirm the reputation of Australian soldiers earned during the First World War for being fierce defiant fighters. The Australian 9th Division featured in the clip had just taken part in the siege of Tobruk in 1941. In the heat of the garrison town, together with British, Indian and Polish forces, they held out against German air raids and artillery attacks for more than six months. German propagandists christened them the 'rats of Tobruk'.
- The laying of mines, shown in the clip, proved to be significant in the final outcome of the Battle. Between January and July 1942 the two armies had dug in and had time to lay extensive minefields along the 64.3-km front that lay between them. The German minefields were so much larger than expected that they held up the Allied tanks in their attempt to break through the enemy lines and support the Allied infantry forces.