

Quietly, the Australians re-entered Kokoda. Apart from its airfield its significance lay only in its name which would identify in history the evil track which passed across the Papuan mountains from the sea to the sea. (Dudley McCarthy, south-west pacific area - first year Kokoda to Wau)



Australians on the Kokoda Trail.
George Browning

In late August, while the Japanese were withdrawing from Milne Bay, the Australians on the Kokoda Trail were forced to withdraw from Isurava. Under fierce attack from Japanese forces the Australians retreated to Templeton's Crossing. By this time the appalling conditions and lack of supplies had caused health problems among the Australian troops. Apart from battle wounds and difficulties with adequate medical treatment, soldiers were sick with dysentery, malaria and weakness from insufficient food. The 39th Australian Infantry Battalion had been reduced greatly in strength by death and other casualties. Even those still on their feet were exhausted and under-nourished.

From his GHQ in Brisbane MacArthur still did not comprehend that his own Allied troops were greatly outnumbered by the Japanese troops on the Kokoda Trail or the extreme privations of the defenders. This was a continuing problem in the Papuan Campaign. The climatic and logistical conditions in Papua made the prompt executive of GHQ orders impossible. MacArthur was under the impression that there were fewer Japanese on the Trail than Australians. In reality there were only about 400 Australians facing 5000 Japanese! He regarded the continued retreats as evidence that the Australians were inefficient jungle fighters. When asked for more supply of planes he refused.

Because of the bad communications between GHQ and the front line, some of the best commanders were relieved of their duties. Major-General Clowes, commanding Milne Force at

the front, Lieut-General Rowell, as GOC Australian Corps, and Major-General 'Tubby' Allen, GOC 7th Australian Division were unfairly relieved of their commands, ironically, on the very eve of success.

On the Kokoda Trail the Australians had to rely on indifferent supply lines. Most supplies were carried by truck to Ower's Corner at the beginning of the Trail. From here on they had to be carried by carriers on foot and mules. Papuan carriers played a vital role in the movement of supplies on the Kokoda Trail. From Ubiri the track was too steep for pack animals and the heavy loads were carried by local people. By this time too, the wounded were being carried down the track. The other method was to drop supplies by Hudson or Douglas aircraft at Myola, a relatively flat area near Templeton's Crossing. this was often unsuccessful as the flying conditions were difficult and pilots were inexperienced in the techniques of this type of flying. A large percentage of the dropped supplies were lost in the jungle or damaged in the drop. These problems were made worse when many of the supply planes at Port Moresby were destroyed in an air-raid.



Papuan carriers lined up at a control point waiting for their loads.

Papuan carriers, guides and soldiers were regarded by Australian troops with great respect and affection. Indeed, without them the troops would not have been able to see the campaign to its successful resolution. They became sentimentally known as 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' from a soldier's verse published in the popular press, "May the mothers of Australia when they offer up a prayer, mention these impromptu angels with their fuzzy wuzzy hair". Some Papuans also helped the Japanese and some were tried and executed by the Australians as collaborators. To the Papuans, however, both the Australians and the Japanese

could have been perceived as invaders who disrupted village life and made excessive demands on the local people. As it was, the Australian Government failed to compensate adequately the people who gave the soldiers such invaluable service.

The Australian retreat continued, first to Efogi, losing the Myola supply point, then to Menari and Nauro. After a fierce battle at Ioribaiwa the exhausted Australians had to withdraw to Imita Ridge, only 50 kilometres from Port Moresby.

By the end of September it became clear that the Japanese would not take the battle to Port Moresby. From a tactical point of view the Australians were now closer to their supply lines. the Japanese, however, were far from theirs. Now, like the Australians, they were exhausted and starving. At the end of September it was the turn of the Australians to pursue the Japanese back over the Owen Stanleys.

Nevertheless the fighting was far from over. The Japanese had dug in at Templeton's Crossing and kept up the fighting for eight days before retreating. Again MacArthur complained about the slowness of the pursuit of the Japanese across the mountains. Blamey was also ordering inappropriate action. General Blamey's position, between the Australian Prime



Stretcher bearers in the Owen Stanley Ranges
William Dargie

Minister and MacArthur, was very difficult. Major H.D. Steward observed that there was "... no doubt that MacArthur was breathing down the neck of the Australian Commander-in-Chief" and that "... It was highly likely that ... John Curtin was also pressing MacArthur's views and uncertainties (on Blamey)". After further fierce fighting with heavy losses on both sides, the Australians recaptured Kokoda, finding it abandoned.

Total casualties of Australian soldiers on the Kokoda Trail from July to November 1942, excluding the Milne Bay engagement, numbered 1,680. Of these, 625 were killed.

The recapture of Kokoda on 2 November was not the end of the campaign to expel the Japanese invaders from Papua. Some of the most fierce fighting came around the isolated beachheads of Buna, Sanananda and Gona. Here exhausted but desperate Japanese soldiers dug in and resisted repeated attacks in horrific conditions.

While Australian forces were fighting in Papua, United States forces had, on 7 August, landed on Guadalcanal in the British Solomon Islands. This campaign exerted great pressure on American resources as it was six months before the conflict was resolved in the Allies' favour. The Japanese finally withdrew by 6 February 1943.



General Sir Thomas Blamey

After commanding the 6th Australian Division in the middle east. Blamey was made Commander of Allied Land Forces in the South West Pacific Area in 1942

Blamey and MacArthur planned that the Australians should mount a rapid offensive against Gona in mid-November. This proved a more protracted operation than MacArthur had foreseen. The Japanese bunkers were well defended and the extremely hot conditions on the swampy coastal plain amid shoulder-high, razor-sharp kunai grass, gave the Australians a new challenge in fighting difficult terrain as well as the enemy. It was not until 9 December that the leader of the 39th Australian Infantry Battalion, Lieut-Colonel R. Honner, was able to send the grimly humorous and pithy message, "Gona's gone!".

American troops had in the meantime arrived for what was also to be a long struggle against Buna. Initially the troops of the United States 32nd Division, 126th and 128th Regiments, made little headway at Buna. Partly because of their inexperience and unreadiness for the type of fighting required, the Americans suffered heavy casualties. Matters improved with the appointment in late November of a more competent American commander, Lieut-General R.L. Eichelberger. It

was not, however, until the Australian Brigadier George Wootten (later Major-General Wootten) took direct command of the Americans on 17 December that the battle for Buna began to go well for the Allies. Wootten brought with him the Australian 2/9th, 2/10th and 2/12th Infantry Battalions. Buna was recaptured on 2 January 1943, and organised resistance from the Japanese ended on 23 January 1943. Most had withdrawn from Papua by the end of January. It is estimated that the Japanese suffered losses of more than 7,000 killed during the Papuan campaign.

After Papua Australians remained under Japanese fire in the mandated Territory of New Guinea until the end of the war.

Kokoda Pilgrimage

By Gordon Maitland

At last I'm here, my dear friend.
I told you I'd be back!
I know I've taken far too long. Since we humped a pack.

Nearby is the Kokoda Trail, Where friends so bravely fell.
They are ghosts who haunt the Trail
With memories of Hell.

That hell endured for months and months
'Twas abject misery;
Exhausting days and freezing nights
And only green to see

Trying to sleep among the dead
While hearing wounded moan.
Little to eat but bully beef,
Our bodies - skin and bone.

And this tale of woe continues
For death was in the air.
No one escaped the diseases
In hiding ev'rywhere.

Hook worm was first, then the fevers
Without care from a nurse.
Foul dysentery sometimes killed
But scrub typhus was worse.

The country itself was hostile,
Gut wrenching climbs every day,
Slipp'ry, sucking mud to wade through,
False crests along the way.

Just being here brings me to tears,
A soldier shouldn't cry
But time can't dim the memories
Of seeing comrades die.

It's at such times I miss you most,
Like those days on the Trail;
When lying in the pit we shared
Both praying not to fail.

As we tried to pierce the blackness
About to learn our fate.
You gave a reassuring nudge
And told me "Steady Mate".

The maelstrom broke soon afterwards
Just at the break of day,
And with it death came marching in
To join us where we lay.

His messengers worked hard that day,
I heard the bullets whine,
Including those that hit their mark
And killed that mate of mine.

Thus ended our wond'rous journey,
Via desert sand and mud,
A story of army mateship,
Destined to end in blood.

Though others lost their mates as well
We ne'er gave up the fight,
Often hand to hand fighting,
'Til They hoisted flags of white.

We finally had forced our foe
To cede complete defeat.
That is why today I stand here
My dear old mates to meet.

Where are those friends of long ago?
Young men who gave their all.
Ever present, they haunt me still
When evening shadows fall.

They fell in the heat of battle,
From some mist shrouded place,
Or down a yawning chasm where
Deafening torrents race.

And for many who died lonely,
No one was there to pray,
With no one there no hymns were sung,
No bugles heard to play.

But at least they had the comfort
Of duty nobly done,
Even if then they did not know
That in the end we won.

Their spirits were quickly taken
From those who paid the price
And sent winging, winging, winging,
To enter Paradise.

Most bodies lie in a graveyard
Bomana is its name.
With ordered row on ordered row
And headstones much the same.

A hallowed place of great beauty;
A place to go and pray.
A place to go and shed your tears
On loved ones where they lay.

Saddest of all are missing,
Those who haven't been found.
Worn by weather and passing years
Now but a nameless mound.

They sleep in strange places
Where man has never trod;
Sunless, hidden, mysterious
Known only unto God.

No matter where they all now rest
They are men that I knew;
Young men who answered the summons
Australian bugles blew.

All left a priceless legacy,
A land secure and free.
And so we rise to salute them
A final act for me.

We few who fought and still survive
Now wait at heaven's door,
To join those, none but we can see
TOGETHER EVER MORE.

Major General Gordon Maitland AO OBE RFD ED (Ret'd) was aged just 17 years of age when he enlisted in the 2nd AIF during the Second World War. After the war he continued to serve and rose through the ranks earning the OBE as a battalion commander and the AO as the commander of the 2nd Division. When his army career ended he was Chief of Reserves at Army Headquarters and a member of the Chief of Army's Advisory Council. His civil life was also distinguished; CEO of The Royal Agricultural Society; member of NSW Government Committees; Chief Manager of the Commonwealth Bank.

For the last 30 odd years he has devoted his life to commemorative and community activities, particularly assisting veterans and their organisations a number of which he has led. He has also had a lifelong dedication to military history and has had 6 books published.

Gordon Maitland has been a long time champion and supporter of the Battle for Australia Association and although he cannot now attend our events due to health reasons, we still keep contact with him and remember his great contribution to our nation. Thus we are so pleased he has allowed us to publish this poem on our website. His poem "Kokoda Pilgrimage" is the story of a Kokoda veteran who returned to Papua New Guinea and visited the grave (at Bomana) of a mate killed in that campaign.