

Tactics of jungle war

The fighting on the Kokoda track was an infantryman's war in close jungle where the enemy was often not seen until he was a few metres away...

In the Second World War in Europe and Africa vast arrays of tanks, aircraft and artillery supported the infantryman. Little of this was available in Papua which is best understood as a foot soldier's war. The tactics of infantry fighting are built upon fire and movement. When attacking, one group moves towards the enemy while the other fires to keep enemy heads down. The former was called the rifle group, armed with rifles, submachine guns and grenades. The latter was the gun group based on at least one light machine gun.

On more open battlefields the gun group might be of company size (about 100 men) with mortars or medium machine guns. They would direct a large volume of fire towards the enemy while another company manoeuvred towards them. This was impossible in Papua because visibility in the jungle is poor, usually from ten to fifty metres, more often the former when fog and rain intervenes. This meant that the defender in his camouflaged fighting pit was not seen until the attacker's lead scout was suddenly fired on by the hidden enemy. If the scout survived, unless he had seen a muzzle flash, he may still not have been able to determine exactly where the fire was coming from. The gun group, further back, was even worse off as it could not determine where to direct fire to support the rifle group.

Another challenge facing soldiers fighting in the jungles was that of being able to issue and receive orders. [Steep slopes](#), few tracks, thick jungle and deep treacherous streams did much to hinder communication. Typically the company commander could see few of his own men and his subordinates, the platoon commanders, were often unsure where they were in relation to their own superior, other platoons and sometimes even their own sections. Conditions were very like night fighting.

Mission Ridge–Brigade Hill – The Australians held the high ground overlooking Efogi

[**Text:** *Mission Ridge - Brigade Hill.*

Mountains covered in dense jungle roll to the horizon. Aerial footage follows the uneven, rugged line of one mountain ridge.

Text: *Mission Ridge near Efogi.*]

Voiceover: Usually, the Kokoda Track climbs and descends across over row after row of jagged ridges against the grain of the country. Sometimes, as here near Efogi, it follows the line of a ridge crest. On the night before the battle of Mission Ridge-Brigade Hill, the Japanese marched along this ridge from right to left. They used makeshift lamps to find their way. The Australians looking down on them from Mission Ridge saw the line of lights snaking along the crest, but had no weapon with sufficient range to fire on them.

Text: *The Kokoda Track.*

Exploring the site of the battle fought by Australians in World War II.

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For all these reasons the typical tactical experience of the infantryman on the Kokoda track was fighting in a section divided into two small groups, a six-man rifle group or a four-man gun group. After locating the enemy the gun group brings fire to bear on them while, under cover of the fire, the rifle group crawls carefully closer to try to lob grenades into the enemy's fighting pit. Suddenly another enemy opens up and the whole movement halts while the problem is reassessed. The platoon leader commits another of his sections to tackle the new threat. Slowly, usually by crawling and using every scrap of cover, and with long periods where no one can see the enemy and the enemy cannot see them, the attack proceeds.

There may still be a great deal of fire going back and forth, as section commanders direct fire at where they think the enemy probably is. Eventually one enemy is grenaded in his pit and a gap in the enemy defences is made. Taking advantage of this the attackers continue edging forward and gradually kill the defenders or force them back. Such engagements required a great deal of patience and skill. To kill a few enemy might take several hours. Quite often soldiers would see no live enemy at all during an engagement.

This was how the campaign along the Kokoda track was fought. The popular image of large formations sweeping the enemy aside with heroic bayonet charges was far from how it actually was for the average soldier.

Patrolling the jungle

Along the Kokoda track, and in the rugged jungle off to the side, both sides were continually patrolling...

As the jungle could easily conceal large numbers of men it was vital to know where the enemy was and what he was up to.

A patrol is a small group who leave the main body to seek information on the enemy. If the fingers of a hand are spread wide then the finger tips represent patrols, while the palm is the main body of troops which waits behind to act on the information the patrols obtain.

There is a tendency to consider the fighting along the [Kokoda track](#) as taking place on a narrow front. In mid-September 1942 the fighting, then at [Ioribaiwa](#), occurred a kilometre or so on either side of the track but both armies had patrols out along a front of over 100 kilometres and sometimes deep behind the enemy front line. During the Ioribaiwa action Australian patrols from 2/6 Independent Company were searching for the enemy along the Vanapa River 50 kilometres

north-west of Ioribaiwa and along the upper reaches of the Kumusi River, 70 kilometres to the north-east.

The 2/1 Pioneers patrolled the immediate flanks of the Australian force on Ioribaiwa ridge to see if the Japanese were looking for approaches to Port Moresby along the Brown and Goldie Rivers. The Japanese 41 Regiment was actively patrolling the same area for just this purpose. They also sent patrols out to the east and west to assure themselves that the Australian had not sent a large force around their flank.

The peculiar aspect of patrolling the vast jungle covered and rugged mountains of the Owen Stanley Range was that these patrols rarely encountered one another. Most patrols returned with no contact nor any sign of the enemy. For all the efforts of 2/1 Pioneer Battalion in the last two weeks of September their patrols encountered the Japanese just twice. On one of these occasions they clashed with the deepest known southward penetration of a Japanese patrol, on the Goldie River, well in the Australian rear and only 35 kilometres from [Port Moresby](#).

Source: DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) (2019), *Tactics of jungle war*.