

THE KOKODA TRACK CAMPAIGN
NEW GUINEA, JULY 1942-JANUARY 1943

by

Maj. Charles J. Miles

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Kansas City, MO

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Early in 1942, the outcome of World War II was still very much in doubt for the Allies. In the Pacific, the American, British, Dutch and Australian armed forces had tried desperately to check the Japanese advances with little success. Malaya, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore and Burma had all been taken by the Japanese. However, 1942 also proved to be the “high-water mark” for the Japanese in the Pacific as the Japanese Fleet was turned back in the Coral Sea and at Midway with the loss of five carriers and the cream of their naval aviation corps between the two battles. Following those setbacks, the Japanese decided to redirect their military efforts towards establishing a defensive perimeter along with isolating and then possibly invading Australia with priority initially being given to completing the occupation of New Guinea.¹ This renewed Japanese advance in the South Pacific would be checked as well at an island named Guadalcanal and on a small and seemingly insignificant trail leading through the New Guinea jungle and over the Owen Stanley Mountains called the Kokoda Trail. To the Australians it would become known as the “Bloody Trail.”

The Japanese Strategy in the South Pacific called for the taking of the Australian port and airfield at Port Moresby on the southern coast of Papua New Guinea. The Japanese had previously attempted to accomplish this through an amphibious assault on the port. The invasion force, however, was recalled following the Battle of the Coral Sea. Though achieving a tactical victory by inflicting more significant losses on the American fleet, the Japanese, surprised and shocked at the presence of American carriers in the Coral Sea, decided to withdraw and provided the Allies with a strategic victory by temporarily halting the Japanese advance on Port Moresby. Despite this setback, the Japanese were still determined to take Port Moresby. However, their subsequent naval losses at Midway eliminated the option, in the minds of

¹ John Costello, *The Pacific War* (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins 1981; reprint, New York, N.Y.: Perennial 2002), 316.

Japanese planners, of re-attempting an amphibious operation to seize the valuable port. This decision would come back to haunt the Japanese as their fleet was actually still superior to that which the allies could assemble and as later shown during the initial stages of Guadalcanal, the Americans were not willing to risk their remaining carriers in another decisive fleet engagement. Instead, the Japanese army developed a plan to land on the northern coast of Papua New Guinea and march the seemingly short 100 miles overland to Port Moresby under air cover provided by aircraft operating from Rabaul.

The Japanese soon landed a force of more than 13,000 men including Tomitaro Horii's 10,000 strong, veteran South Seas Force.² Though surprised by the landing, MacArthur, the Supreme Allied Commander in the Southwest Pacific Area, did not initially seem very concerned about the Japanese landing believing that the Japanese intended only to open up an advance airfield. MacArthur also believed that an advance in strength over the Owen Stanley Range was impossible. Japanese planners had underestimated the challenge that the Owen Stanley Range presented to their plans as their maps lacked contour lines for the mountains, which would have illustrated their severity.³ Compounding this miscalculation was the always-harsh conditions of jungle warfare. The 100-mile long trail snaked its way from Buna on the north coast, through the jungle, over the steep Owen Stanley Range which rose to 6,800 feet and down again into the jungle and to Port Moresby on the southern coast. The trail was narrow, often just the width of a man's shoulders and frequently flanked by seven-foot-tall blades of Kunai grass sharp enough to slice flesh like a knife blade or seemingly impassible jungle. The steep gradients of the mountain made movement difficult and slow. It was so steep that a donkey or mule could not

² *Kokoda Track Campaign*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/KokodaTrack_Campaign#Prelude_to_the_battle>, accessed on 26 October 2005.

³ William Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness; A Memoir of the Pacific War* (Boston, New York and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1980; Back Bay Books, 2002),

climb it. The average annual rainfall for the region is 16 feet with 10-inch daily rainfalls not being uncommon. The rain would turn the already difficult terrain to almost impassible. The trail would transform in the rain to a slippery and calf-deep muddy quagmire. All supplies had to be moved by men with the exception of a small airstrip at Kokoda on a small plateau on the northern side of the mountains that would allow limited re-supply by air.⁴

Nevertheless, the Japanese were determined to make the crossing and pressed up the trail. Initially facing Japanese in Papua, New Guinea was just the scattered Australian 39th (Militia) Battalion with 533 men under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Owen.⁵ When the Japanese landed at Buna, Owen had only one company of about 120 men on the northern side of the Owen Stanleys in a position to block or delay the Japanese advance force of one battalion from the Japanese 144th Infantry Regiment and a company of Japanese Marines from the 5th Sasebo Naval Landing Force, in all, a force of more than 500 men, sent to seize Kokoda and make a reconnaissance in force of the trail.⁶ Outnumbered and outgunned, as the Japanese had manhandled heavy machine guns and mortars up the trail, the under supplied and near starving Australians were forced back through Kokoda but the Australians fought with such ferocity that the Japanese believed they faced an enemy force of approximately 6,000 soldiers.⁷ In what would become the Japanese trademark in jungle fighting, the Japanese sent part of its force to hack its way through the dense jungle, flanking the defenders and forced their withdrawal during which the Australian commander, Owen, was killed. By the 29th of July the Japanese had taken

⁴ William Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness*, 111; *A Cross-Section View of the Kokoda Track*, <<http://www.users.bigpond.com/battleforaustralia/battaust/KokodaCampaign/KokodaSectionView.html>>, accessed on 27 Oct 2005.

⁵ William Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness*, 112; *Kokoda Track Campaign*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kokoda_Track_Campaign>, accessed on 27 October 2005.

⁶ *Kokoda*, <<http://www.users.bigpond.com/battleforaustralia/battaust/KokodaCampaign/IntoHellMouth.html>>, accessed 27 October 2005.

⁷ *Kokoda Track Campaign*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kokoda_Track_Campaign#Prelude_to_the_battle>, accessed on 27 October 2005.

Kokoda and its airstrip. General Horii now began to send additional elements of his South Seas Force up the trail to Kakoda in preparation for his full-scale assault on Port Moresby.

The Australians too began to feed in reinforcements, sending them up the trail from Port Moresby. The remaining battalions of the 30th (Militia) Brigade, the 49th and 55th Battalions, were sent over the Owen Stanley Range to join with the 39th so as to deny the Japanese passage over the Range. The 7th Australian Infantry Division would also be embarked on ships in Australia and transported to Port Moresby to join the battle as MacArthur slowly became aware just how severe a threat the Japanese force on New Guinea now represented to Port Moresby. Meanwhile, the supply situation for the Australian forces on the north side of the range was critical as the loss of the airfield at Kokoda meant all supplies had to be carried over the mountains by hand. Papuan porters that the “Diggers” (Australian soldiers) called “Fuzzy-Wuzzies” because of their large and curly hairstyle accomplished this task. They also carried the wounded back over the mountains and down the trail earning them a slight modification to original nickname, “Fuzzy-Wuzzie Angels.”

Before significant Australian reinforcement could arrive, however, Horii attacked the some 400 Australians dug-in at Isurava, a village on the Track just south of Kokoda but still on the north side of the mountain range. The ensuing four-day battle was costly for the Japanese as the Australians were able to inflict heavy casualties and slow the Japanese advance. Both sides fed in reinforcements piecemeal as they arrived to the battle. Eventually the Japanese numbered 5,000 to the Australians 1,000.⁸ In another flanking maneuver, the Japanese again forced the Australians to retreat, this time over the mountain range while mounting delaying rear-guard actions. Eventually the Australians stopped near the village of Ioribaiwa on the southern side of

⁸ *Kokoda Track Campaign*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kokoda_Track_Campaign#Prelude_to_the_battle>, accessed on 27 October 2005.

the mountains and dug in on Imita Ridge. Although having taken Ioribaiwa and within sight of Port Moresby, General Horii halted his advance on September 17th after two weeks of trying to break through the reinforced Australian positions on Imita Ridge. The Japanese logistical situation was now desperate while the Australians enjoyed shorter supply lines and were soon being bolstered with additional reinforcements. No supplies were reaching the Japanese forces on the southern side of the Owen Stanley Mountains. Horii's men were exhausted, starving and suffering from dysentery and malaria. Low on food, ammunition and medical supplies, Horii correctly judged that he could not continue the Japanese offensive. His men were in such dire straits that some were even resorting to cannibalism.⁹

Horii's stalled offensive would not receive any additional reinforcements or support as the battle for control of Guadalcanal, which began on the 7th of August, had become the new Japanese priority in the South Pacific. Guadalcanal siphoned off the men and supplies Horii desperately needed to continue his advance to take Port Moresby. On the 18th of September, Horii began a retreat back over the mountains to Buna followed closely by the Aussie's 7th Division.¹⁰ The 7th Division retook Kokoda on October 28 but it took until the 10th of November to finally dislodge the Japanese from their position in the foothills at Oivi just south of the Kumusi River. Horii was killed during the Japanese retreat when he was carried away by the swift current of the Kumusi River and drowned. To speed up the taking of Buna, MacArthur committed the U.S. 32nd Division to the battle, airlifting two of its regiments over the Owen Stanley Range.

By the middle of November, the U.S. and Australian forces had pushed the Japanese back to the northern coastline of New Guinea into several pockets between the village of Buna and

⁹ William Manchester, *Goodbye Darkness*, 113.

¹⁰ John Costello, *The Pacific War, 337; Kokoda Track Campaign*,

Gona. To MacArthur's great displeasure and frustration, the addition of the 32nd division had not sped up the conclusion of the campaign. The U.S. 32nd Division had become mired in the swampy approaches to Buna and was suffering badly from the heat and disease. The terrain and conditions, combined with the well dug-in Japanese, assailable only through costly frontal assaults, slowed the Allied advance to a crawl. To MacArthur's further ire, the Australians were advancing more rapidly than the Americans, and despite an almost 3:1 advantage in manpower; the allies were experiencing great difficulty in finishing off the remaining ragged Japanese defenders.¹¹ Losing his patience, MacArthur finally placed Major General Robert Eichelberger in charge of the 32nd Division on December 1st, telling him to "take Buna- or don't come back alive."¹² The Australians would take Gona on the 9th of December and Buna would finally be taken on the 13th. However, it took another month more of hard fighting against fanatical Japanese resistance to mop-up their last few positions left between Gona and Buna giving the allies their first taste of the Japanese Bushido code. The Japanese were going to fight to the death rather than dishonor themselves in surrender. This was to be a dark omen of future battles in the Pacific.

The fighting in New Guinea has been called some of the toughest fighting in the world. The campaign cost the Australians 5,698 casualties; 2,165 killed and 3,533 wounded. American total casualties were 2,848; 864 killed, 66 missing and 1,918 wounded. The Japanese lost 12,000 killed out of the 17,000 troops eventually committed to the campaign. A testament to the miserable conditions endured by the soldiers is the number of those infected with disease during the campaign. Only a few thousand Australians escaped the campaign without disease of which there were 15,575 total cases by the end of 1942, including 9,249 cases of malaria, 3,643 cases of

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kokoda_Track_Campaign#Prelude_to_the_battle>, accessed on 27 October 2005.

¹¹ *Battle of Buna-Gona*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Buna-Gona>, accessed on 27 October 2005.

dysentery, 1,186 cases of dengue fever, and 186 cases of scrub typhus. The Americans fared slightly better due to several months less exposure to the jungle conditions with a total of 8,659 cases of infectious disease out of the 14,646 troops committed in the campaign.¹³ Despite the high cost in casualties, the allies had secured Papua and prevented a Japanese invasion of Australia. MacArthur also had a forward base for further operations along the northern New Guinea coast towards his “Holy Grail,” the Philippines.

The allies learned some valuable lessons from this campaign. Tactics would have to be developed to deal with the Japanese strategy of a defense in depth anchored by heavily fortified bunkers and strong points experienced at the Battle of Buna-Gona near the end of the campaign. Artillery, napalm, satchel charges, rifle grenades and flamethrowers would become essential weapons in the war against the Japanese throughout the Pacific Campaign to root out the well dug-in and fanatical defenders who refused to surrender. The use of malarial suppressants was a medical necessity to keep malaria from incapacitating men with disease just as effectively as the enemy was able to do by force of arms. It was also learned that troops should be properly trained and equipped for the environment in which they were to fight. This included a smaller, lighter and a less complicated weapon than the M-1 rifle, like the carbine. Perhaps the most significant lesson taken away from this campaign, however, was a lesson of logistics. The Japanese were stopped due to their inability to bring supplies over the Kokoda Track in enough quantity to sustain their drive on Port Moresby and were forced to retreat as a result. This did not go unnoticed by General MacArthur. Realizing that he could defeat the Japanese by isolating their garrisons, he resolved to bypass any he could. He would destroy any air forces in those garrisons so as to eliminate any threat they could pose to his lines of communication and simply bypass

¹² John Costello, *The Pacific War*, 378.

¹³ *Victory in Papua*, < <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-P-Papua/USA-P-Papua-19.html>>, accessed 28

them while preventing any resupply or evacuation by sea with the rapidly increasing allied naval superiority in the Pacific. This strategy had the added advantage in avoiding a slow advance and the heavy casualties as seen at Buna-Gona.

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