

# **Past Time, and Your Time, On the Kokoda Trail**



**© 2005 by Geoff Doherty**

*Note: Sources have been quoted in a condensed form (Author, p No.) in the text at end of relevant passage, for reasons of space. A bibliography giving full details of all works consulted, including other recommended works, appears at the end.*

Purchased by Gail Thomas (Gail@matryx.com.pg)

## Introduction

With the trek you will soon be, or are now, undertaking, you will retrace the footsteps, made over sixty years ago during the Second World War, of the soldiers who fought to conquer, or defend, Papua New Guinea and Australia. The defenders won a hard fought battle that was often in the balance. In doing so, they created a legend. A legend you are here to re-live and experience, as best you can, compressing some three months of fierce campaigning (the part which involved the fighting for the Kokoda Trail) into a six or nine day trek. This booklet provides a condensed history of the campaign, and a place to record your thoughts on your trek.

What is today known as the Kokoda Trail had a long genesis. Kokoda Station was established in June 1904 (Hawthorne, p101). Roughly six month's after the station's establishment, an overland route, direct from Kokoda to Port Moresby, was inaugurated (Hawthorne, p101). While it was not the first overland route to be pioneered, it was the first truly viable one. It became part of a 200 kilometre long walking track that stretched north to south and linked Buna to Port Moresby. Over time the extremities of the track became proper roads, and now only the 96 kilometre central, and most difficult, section remains as a walking track. Europeans took almost thirty years to establish permanent overland communication from the south to north coasts of eastern Papua New Guinea following the arrival of the first permanent European residents at Moresby Harbour in November 1874 (Hawthorne, p4).

This thirty year delay was not from want of trying. Many expeditions, from both the north and south coasts, set out to find a way through to the other side (Hawthorne, maps pp17, 33, 43, 46, 56). The main reason for the delay in establishing an overland route was the terrain itself. The Owen Stanley Range in general, and the 4072 metre high Mount Victoria, in particular, presented a formidable barrier to would-be travellers. An overland route was first pioneered by Sir William MacGregor in 1896, building on the work of previous exploratory attempts. However, this route was acknowledged as being very difficult, (even more so than the route that became the Kokoda Trail) and had its southern egress on the coast well away from Port Moresby (Hawthorne, pp52-5).

One of the driving forces behind the continued search for a viable overland route was the average six week timeframe for mail, and goods and people also, to travel by sea, then human portorage, from Port Moresby to Kokoda and other northern coast areas (Hawthorne, p102). With the establishment of an overland route, it was thought that mail would take as little as one week to reach Kokoda from Port Moresby (Hawthorne, p102).

Another driving force towards an overland route, as with much other European colonial development elsewhere in the world, was the discovery of gold. Gold was first found in 1876, and the first prospectors began arriving in 1878 to try their luck along the Laloki and Goldie rivers on the southern coast (Hawthorne, pp7-9). These southern strikes soon petered out, yet prospectors persisted, and, over the years, slowly worked their way east along the coast to Milne Bay, and then along the northern coast (Hawthorne, pp 12 & 39-44). In 1895 prospectors reached the Mambare River, on the northern coast, and pushed inland along it. Around what was to become the Tamata Station area, located roughly halfway between Kokoda and Mambare Bay on the north coast, they found useful deposits of gold, and the rush was on (Hawthorne, p44).

The finding of gold in Papua New Guinea never generated the type of rushes experienced earlier in Victoria (Australia), or in California (North America), where tens of thousands of people responded to the lure of gold from across the globe. In Papua New Guinea only hundreds were involved at any one time. This was due to three main factors: the terrain, in the form of the rugged Owen Stanley Range; the tropical climate, and the types of thick jungle or forest vegetation or swampy lowland associated with it; and the native tribes-people themselves.

The Papuan natives had a fierce reputation, which followed from a warrior ethos, which included, in places, a penchant for head-hunting – the literal kind, not the corporate type of today. Early explorer Carl Hartmann, a Victorian botanist, noted in 1887 that ‘a great difficulty is to get through the mountain tribes; very hostile, guarding the mountain range very carefully against intruders’ (Hawthorne, pp28-30). The natives did adapt, over time, to the controls introduced by Western, white governance, and were to play a pivotal role in turning the tide against an Eastern power when it chose to invade their homeland in 1942.



## **Trek Day One: Port Moresby to Kokoda**

As this first day of the trek is largely taken up with travel to, and sight-seeing in and around, Kokoda, this section will be used to summarise Second World War events leading to the start of your trek. Also, please note that the campaign comprised **two distinct phases**: the first phase, July-September 1942, when the Japanese were in the ascendant, and pushing towards Port Moresby, and the second, in October-November, when the Allies gained control and began forcing the Japanese back to their landing points. This means that each section of the track you will be walking was fought over twice. Sub-headings **in bold** will be used in each trek day's description to **distinguish the separate phases** that occurred.

**July 1942 (Aust. Retreat)** Japanese troops first came ashore near Gona, on the northern coast, on 21 July 1942 to begin the invasion of Papua New Guinea (Ham pp 3 & 7). However, this was not their most preferred invasion point, which was to have been a full-blown sea-borne assault on Port Moresby (Brune, pp. 7-8). Over 5-8 May 1942 the Battle of the Coral Sea was fought and, whilst considered inconclusive in terms of numbers of ships lost by either side, resulted in the turning back of the Japanese invasion force destined for Port Moresby (Brune, p8). Then, over 4-6 June 1942, the Battle of Midway was fought and the Japanese Navy was soundly beaten (Brune, p8). These naval actions forced the Japanese to consider an overland attack to capture Port Moresby, as they no longer had sufficient naval strength to support an invasion force travelling directly by sea to attack that town. The best they could do was to get to the north coast. At this stage of the war the Japanese plan was to isolate Australia, as a usable base for the Allies, by occupying PNG and interdicting the air and sea-lanes from Port Moresby. They did not intend to invade Australia (Ham p12).

The Allied force initially allocated to the defence of New Guinea in 1941 consisted of 39<sup>th</sup>, 49<sup>th</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> Militia Battalions of the Australian Army, all relatively newly raised for home service only and poorly equipped and trained, and a regiment of field artillery. There were no naval ships, and the air cover consisted of flying boats, old bombers and armed trainers (McAulay pp 3-5). Port Moresby was not prepared to receive them – there were supply problems, training problems, ammunition shortages, no mail and low morale (McAulay p8). In May 1942, the Australian 3<sup>rd</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> Militia Battalions were ordered to Port Moresby, and the American 32<sup>nd</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> Divisions had arrived in Australia. In June 1942, the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion, and the Papuan Infantry Battalion (PIB) was detailed to defend Kokoda and

became known as 'Maroubra Force' (McAulay p14-5). Defences and manpower were slowly being built up.



However, the initial Japanese landing force, while only 2000 strong but soon to be followed by another 10000 men in mid-August (Ham pp13-4), was quicker and quite strong enough to deal with the ill-organised Australians it found facing it. This small force, made up of veterans of previously successful Japanese attacks in Malaya and Rabaul, moved inland quickly and engaged platoon sized Australian forces at Awala on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July, and pushed them back, then moved on towards Kokoda (Hawthorne p190). Further skirmishing continued as the Australian infantry continued to withdraw towards Kokoda, where they planned to make their first substantial stand against the Japanese. Initially, to the fight for Kokoda and beyond, the Japanese outnumbered the Australians about 10-1, yet what they had in manpower, they lacked in man-portable firepower. The Japanese had nothing to match automatic weapons like the Bren and Tommy guns, which were effective and portable by a single man. They did have heavier firepower in their mountain artillery, which could be carried in pieces from place to place, and heavy machine-guns, and these weapons caused many Allied casualties, but they were not easily, or quickly, moved from one position to a new one (Ham p45).

The first battle for Kokoda was fought in the early hours of 29 July 1942. At 2am the Japanese attacked with 400 men against positions held by less than 80 Australians (McAulay p52). Although the Australians fought bravely, and at times hand-to-hand, they were outclassed and out-positioned, their commander was one of many killed and before dawn the remainder, with their wounded, were in full retreat through the Kokoda rubber plantations to the next defensive position, at Deniki (Ham pp49-53). For now, Kokoda, and its strategic airfield, belonged to the Japanese. Kokoda is where you will start your trek, following in the path of the retreating Australians as they fell back from their first serious encounter with the Japanese, and the place where the defence of New Guinea really began.

At Deniki, the Australians regrouped. A new commander arrived for the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion. More importantly, the rest of the battalion arrived with him. The new commander, Major Cameron, now with about 500 men under his command, decided to attack, and retake, Kokoda. He devised a bold, three-pronged attack plan, each attack force consisting of about company strength, which almost worked (McAulay pp70-1). On 8 August 1942, just ten days after the loss of Kokoda, he put his plan in motion. Unfortunately, two prongs of the attack force soon ran into Japanese forces, and after sharp engagements, eventually withdrew back to Deniki again (McAulay pp73-5). The third prong of the attack, A Company of the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion,

actually walked into Kokoda unopposed, and reoccupied it (Ham pp54-7). Because of their aggressive military ethos, the Japanese had pushed all their available strength forward to harass what they thought were the retreating Australian forces at Deniki and had left no one to defend Kokoda (McAulay p76).



These events highlight the folly of splitting forces. The Australian companies, individually, were not strong enough to deal with the Japanese forces they encountered, and so two were turned back. The force that did occupy Kokoda could hear 'distant sounds of battle' (McAulay p76), but had no nearby support on which they could call for assistance. Nor were they able to assist their comrades, not knowing their situations. Once they had settled themselves in Kokoda, the men of A Company sent up a flare, the agreed signal to indicate their success to those remaining at Deniki, but it was not seen (Ham p57)! Not only did Cameron split his forces, he failed to reinforce the success of one of them. The men of A Company had no way of knowing that no assistance was coming their way, but assumed it was, so, obedient to their orders, they stayed where they were – for two and a half days!

The Japanese quickly responded to this surprise situation. In 24 hours they launched four assaults at the dug-in Australians. The advantage of being on a ridge-top and falling torrential rain aided the defenders. In a foretaste of the future, the slope and the mud and the jungle proved too much for the Japanese. The fighting closed to hand-to-hand at times, but the Japanese could not exploit these small break throughs or did not see them in the dark or rain. The Japanese finally took the position at dusk on 10 August, only to find the Australians had again retreated to Deniki (Ham pp58-9). Kokoda belonged to the Japanese once again, but the Australians had shown they could fight.

**November 1942 (Aust. Advance)** Just three months later, on the first day of November, but after long weeks of heavy fighting in sometimes horrendous conditions, the Australians were back in Kokoda – their entry unopposed. The Japanese were by now in full retreat. The air-strip, which the Japanese had not used and allowed to become overgrown, was cleaned up, and Kokoda quickly became a central part of the next stage of the campaign, the thrust to the sea and victory in Papua New Guinea (Ham pp383-5).

