

The Kokoda Track

War on our doorstep 1942

January: Japanese invade Rabaul, New Britain. Seen as a prelude to invasion of New Guinea. Australia begins sending troops to reinforce New Guinea.

February 8: Japanese land troops at Lae and Salamaua in New Guinea.

April: Allies receive intelligence of Japanese plan to invade Port Moresby in May.

May 4-8: Battle of Coral Sea thwarts seaborne invasion of Port Moresby. Japanese look for another route.

July 7: A small detachment of troops begin the trek to reinforce Kokoda.

July 12: A small contingent of Japanese troops land near Gona on the northeast coast of New Guinea to scout the track for a possible overland route to Port Moresby.

July 21-22: Thousands more Japanese troops land at Gona and Buna (south of Gona) to reinforce the beach-head and to build a road across the Owen Stanley Range to Port Moresby.

July 23: Japanese troops reach Awala where they engage Papuan Infantry. Papuan Infantry retreats and meets B company of the 39th Battalion who are in the area taking stores to Buna. They withdraw to Kokoda plateau where more of the 39th are preparing defences.

July 29: Japanese reach Australian positions and attack. The Australians fight their way back to Deniki where they are joined by more Australian troops. Over the next few days the Australians conduct a guerilla war against the Japanese.

August 8: Australian troops launch a three-pronged attack to retake Kokoda. But they are forced to retreat again to Deniki.

August 14: In danger of being wiped out the Australians fall back again to Isurava.

August 23: Troops from the 2nd AIF reach Isurava to reinforce the 39th.

August 26: Japanese advance resumes. The 53rd AMF are ordered to counter attack but are scattered in disarray.

August 29: The 2/16th launches a counter attack to allow the recently arrived 2/14th to withdraw to Eora Creek.

August 30: Japanese attempting flanking manoeuvre, the 2/16th and 2/14th both withdraw to Eora Creek. Over 170 of the 2/14th go missing.

August 31: The 39th has taken up a secure position at Eora creek, the Japanese are unable to budge them.

September 1: Japanese attack but are driven back by the 2/16th.

September 2: Australian troops fall back to Templeton's Crossing.

September 5: Remnants of 2/16th, 2/14th and 39th make their way to Efofi.

September 8: The Japanese launch an attack but are repelled. They encircle the Australian positions but the Australians are able to break out to fall back to Menari. The 39th are sent away from the lines for rest and training.

September 10: Brigadier Porter of the 30th relieves Brigadier Poits, moves headquarters to Ioribaiwa.

September 11: Japanese launch another assault.

September 14: Japanese advance comes to a halt. Fresh troops arrive at the Australian lines and an offensive is launched against the Japanese. Facing heavy artillery fire the Australians retreat further to Imita Ridge to establish a firm base. Australian artillerymen are then able to set up guns at Owers' Corner to begin shelling the enemy.

September 26: Australian troops begin advance. They reach Ioribaiwa to find Japanese in retreat.

October 2: Australian troops reach Menari.

October 4: Australian troops reach Efofi.

October 12-20: Australians reach Templeton's Crossing and find Japanese soldiers entrenched there. A fierce battle ensues stalling the Australian advance. The Australians attack positions beyond Templeton's Crossing and force the Japanese to withdraw.

October 23: Australians attack Eora Creek, encountering stiff resistance.

October 28: The 2/3rd Battalion troops charge the Japanese flank at Eora and take the position.

November 2: Kokoda is finally retaken.

November 6: Japanese launch counter-attack but are unable to break Australian lines.

November 9: Large Japanese force is surrounded. They try to break through but are unable. The remnants of the Japanese forces are later seen heading toward Buna.

November 19: The campaign to retake Gona, Buna and Salamaua begins.

Background

Surprised by the speed of their own advance across Asia and the Pacific up to April 1942 Japanese military leaders found themselves faced with the decision what to do next. Australia was a possible thorn in their side since the country could be used as a base for operations against Japan's conquests in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

Although it is unlikely that they ever seriously considered invasion they looked to New Guinea as a possible base for operations against Australia, perhaps to cut the country off or to attack strategic points.

They despatched an invasion fleet for Port Moresby but it was met by American and Australian ships at the Battle of Coral Sea fought from May 4-8. They were forced instead to try an overland route to capture Port Moresby. Landing at Gona and Buna on the northeast coast of New Guinea on July 21 they began the trek over the mountains along the Kokoda Track.



Australian experience

The Australian troops who fought on the Kokoda Track were initially inexperienced militiamen. Troops from the 39th Citizens Military Force (CMF) were the first Australians to engage the Japanese on the track. Although under-trained, under-equipped and mostly under 20 their tenacity was legendary.

After the first retreats they were joined by AIF troops. The Australian troops not only fought against a numerically superior force but, at least in the initial battles, were not prepared for jungle warfare. They wore khaki uniforms that stood out in the jungle and gave them no protection against the insects, the rain or the chill of night. They were issued with a half blanket to sleep under at night. They carried up to 30kg of equipment that was mostly useless in the jungle, including outdated Lee Enfield rifles and machine guns (the Owen gun, which was well suited to jungle warfare, would not be issued until late in 1942).

The track itself was often so steep that soldiers would suffer medical problems related to negotiating the terrain well after the war. On top of that their Commanders Blamey and MacArthur, not understanding the difficulties the troops faced, chastised them for their efforts. Against these odds the Australian troops managed to hold off the Japanese and finally push them back along the track.



UNITS THAT FOUGHT AT KOKODA

- AIF:** 7th Division 21 Brigade 2/14, 2/16, 2/27 Infantry Battalions
25 Brigade 2/25, 2/31, 2/33 Infantry Battalions
- 6th Division** 16 Brigade 2/1, 2/2, 2/3 Infantry Battalions
2/1 Pioneer Battalion
2/6 Independent Company
- MILITIA:** 3rd, 39th, 53rd Infantry Battalions.
Papuan Infantry Battalion.



Australian troops advance through mud, past an abandoned Japanese bicycle on the Kokoda - Wairopi Track.

Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels



Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels carrying a wounded Australian soldier on the Kokoda Track



Ovora Indiki, a Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel at the dedication of a memorial to the diggers of Kokoda Track at Isurava in August 2002

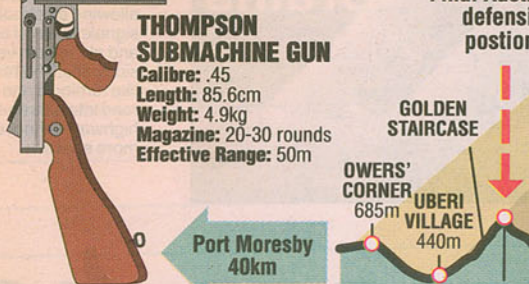
The Australian troops were aided in their battles by New Guinea natives, who became known as the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels.

As B Company of the 39th Battalion made its way across the track in early July their commander Captain Sam Templeton organised with officers Bert Kienzle, an Australian planter who had lived in New Guinea, and Dr Geoffrey Vernon to hire native carriers to help with supplies. Many of the Fuzzy Wuzzies were from the Koiari tribes who knew the territory well. They were to stay with the army throughout the

campaign. Unlike those hired by the Japanese who refused to put up with the abuse from the Emperor's soldiers.

The natives were skilled at bushcraft and negotiating seemingly impassable terrain. They helped to carry in supplies and carry out wounded soldiers. Sometimes they refused to use the military issue stretchers, preferring to make their own.

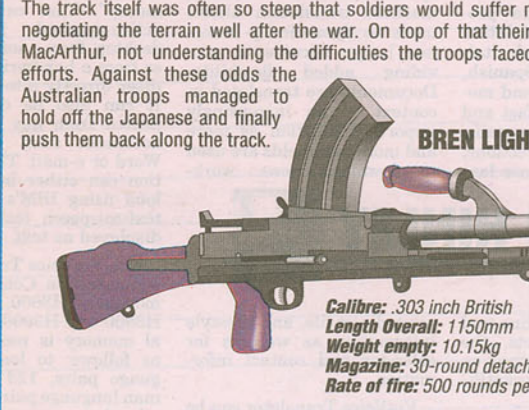
The wounded often endured hours in the stretcher but were tended to with great care by the natives.



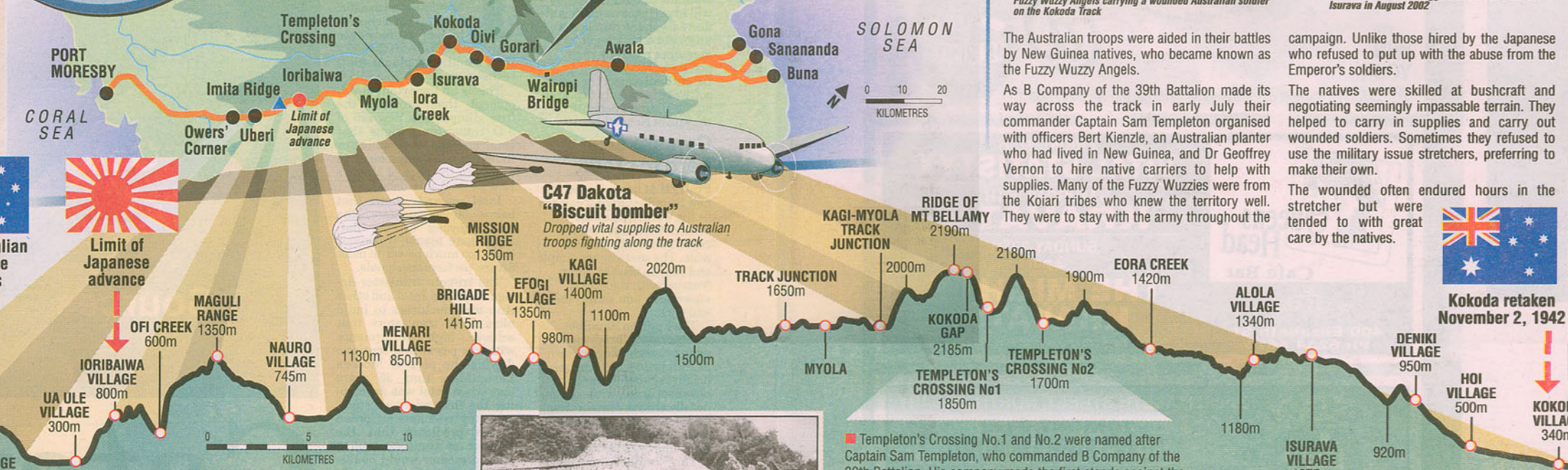
THOMPSON SUBMACHINE GUN
Calibre: .45
Length: 85.6cm
Weight: 4.9kg
Magazine: 20-30 rounds
Effective Range: 50m



BREN LIGHT MACHINE GUN



JUKI (TYPE 92) MEDIUM MACHINE GUN
Calibre: 7.7 mm
Length: 116 cm
Weight: 29kg (gun) 27kg (tripod)
Feed: 30 round metal strip
Rate of Fire: 500 rpm



Australian troops and native carriers cross the Brown River between Nauro and Menari



Menari, September 22, 1942: members of the 39th Battalion parade after weeks of fighting in dense jungle during the Kokoda Campaign. (photographer: Damien Parer)

Japanese Soldiers in Kokoda

When the Australians met the Japanese on the Kokoda Track they were surprised by how well trained, tenacious, well-equipped and even how tall they were. The popular image was that the Japanese were short, myopic, and militarily backward.

Japanese soldiers were mostly battle-hardened veterans who lived by a warrior's code known as Bushido, which emphasized "allegiance to the Emperor; self-sacrifice and deprivation; faith; trust in officers and fellow soldiers; and uprightiness, thriftiness, valour, frugality, honour and a highly developed sense of shame".

It was considered dishonourable to surrender and be taken prisoner (although many were) and often in battle

they took no prisoners. Confident they could reach Port Moresby in a matter of days when they landed at Gona and Buna they took less than two weeks supplies and were told to live off the land if the campaign went longer.

When they met more resistance than expected they suffered heavy losses and soon became exhausted and dispirited.

Unable to throw fresh troops into the battle they were pushed back by the Australians who were better able to supply and relieve their men.

Templeton's Crossing No.1 and No.2 were named after Captain Sam Templeton, who commanded B Company of the 39th Battalion. His company made the first stands against the Japanese. While his troops held out at Oivi he walked into the jungle alone to warn D Company, who were coming from Kokoda, that they might encounter Japanese along the track. A burst of machine gun fire was heard from his direction and he was never seen again.

This machine gun was nicknamed the "Woodpecker" by Australian soldiers, because it sounded like a woodpecker pecking a tree when it was fired.

Milne Bay



CURTISS P-40E KITTYHAWK
Type: Single seat fighter-bomber, RAAF
Engine: One 1150hp Allison piston engine
Speed: 582kph
Max. range (with drop tank): 1448km
Ceiling: 8839m
Armament: 6 x .50 in machine guns in wings provision for one 227kg bomb below fuselage

Near midnight on August 25, 1942, Japanese troops landed at Milne Bay with the aim of setting up a base to support the assault on Port Moresby via the Kokoda track. The allies had been warned of the possibility of a Milne Bay attack and had already sent 8,800 men there to prepare for a planned assault on Rabaul, to defend the bases and to attack the Japanese from the air.

The Japanese did not expect so many troops and they were repelled in 12 days of intense fighting. They evacuated by September 6. The victory at Milne Bay was the first defeat of a major Japanese amphibious landing and helped destroy the image of the invincibility of the Emperor's troops. It also prevented the Japanese from establishing another base from which to supply their troops and attack Australians on the Kokoda Track.