

THE KOKODA CAMPAIGN: MYTH AND REALITY

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The Second World War's Kokoda campaign in Papua, fought between Australian and Japanese military forces from 21 July to 2 November 1942, is often compared to the First World War's 1915 Gallipoli campaign. Gallipoli, as the argument goes, fostered the recently federated Australian national identity, while Kokoda marked Australia coming of age.¹ Myth permeates these wartime conceptions. Here myth refers to widely held but false ideas that misrepresent the truth, which results in an exaggerated conception.

For Kokoda, there are two main causes of the myth creation. First, the inevitable errors in Australian military operational reporting at the time, exacerbated by the 'fog of war'. Secondly, an early lack of access to Japanese war records, and more recently, once available, a failure by many historians to access those records.²

The main Kokoda myth, founded in false friend and foe wartime propaganda, is that Japanese troops outnumbered the Australians.³ This and other myths have recently been dispelled by comparing Japanese and Australian war records. The lessons learnt from the Kokoda campaign were significant.

The operational picture



A view of the jungle that confronted Australian troops in the fight against the Japanese in the Kokoda area.

On the night of 21 July, Japanese military forces landed in the Buna-Gona area on the north coast of Papua.⁴ Their objective was to fight on foot, via the village of Kokoda, through the

¹ Anderson, N. 2014. *To Kokoda*. Newport, N.S.W.: Big Sky Publishing (Australian Army Campaigns Series), p.9.

² *Ibid.* p.9.

³ Williams, P. 2012. *The Kokoda Campaign 1942: Myth and Reality* (Australian Army History Series). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 1.

⁴ Anderson, N. 2014. *To Kokoda*. Newport, N.S.W.: Big Sky Publishing (Australian Army Campaigns Series), p.9.

Owen Stanley Ranges to capture Port Moresby on the south coast of Papua. Moresby is around 150 km from Buna-Gona, while Kokoda is around 100 km from Moresby.

The route to Moresby from Kokoda is an inhospitable one. Australians knew it as the Kokoda Trail, which to a height of 5000 metres continually rises and falls from mountains and valleys.⁵ The weather conditions are extreme, ranging from hot and humid, and cold and wet.

Japan's operational rationale was that to protect their main base at Rabaul it was necessary to control Port Moresby, as well as the Solomon Islands.⁶ Broadly, the Japanese captured Kokoda from the Australians on 29 July. This secured for them control of the only airfield between Port Moresby and Buna-Gona.⁷ By 17 September, they had pushed the Australians to Imita Ridge that is only around 50 km from Port Moresby.⁸

However, the landing of U.S. troops at Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands in August, and their mounting victories against Japanese forces there changed Japan's operational imperatives.⁹ Japan's focus became the Solomon Islands. This meant Japanese troops withdrew back up the Kokoda Trail to establish a defensive stance back on the northern side of the Owen Stanley Ranges. Australian troops retook Kokoda by November 2.¹⁰

Myths¹¹ and realities



A patrol of the 2/31st Battalion negotiates a path through the Owen Stanley Ranges during the Kokoda campaign. The 2/31st were the first Australian troops to re-enter Kokoda.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.13.

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Kokoda-Track-Campaign> [Accessed 6 July 2022]

⁸ Coulthard-Clark, C.D. 2010. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, p. 223.

⁹ Anderson, N. 2014. *To Kokoda*. Newport, N.S.W.: Big Sky Publishing (Australian Army Campaigns Series), p.14.

¹⁰ Coulthard-Clark, C.D. 2010. *The Encyclopaedia of Australia's Battles*. Allen & Unwin, p. 223.

¹¹ Williams, P. 2012. *The Kokoda Campaign 1942: Myth and Reality* (Australian Army History Series). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 4.

Myth: That the Japanese held a troop superiority during the Kokoda campaign.

Reality: Australian troop numbers were superior to Japanese numbers during the campaign. Compared to the Japanese, more than twice as many Australians fought on the Kokoda Trail.¹²

Myth: The Australian fighting retreat along the Kokoda Trail saved Port Moresby.

Reality: Because of the U.S. military's landings on Guadalcanal, Japan's focus became the reinforcement of its defence of the Solomon Islands. Japanese forces in Papua were ordered to halt their advance on Port Moresby and return to the northern side of the Owen Stanley Ranges.¹³

Myth: The Japanese were ignorant of the conditions in the theatre of war.

Reality: Prior to the waging of war in the South West Pacific the Japanese had surveyed the tracks of the Owen Stanley Ranges that led to Port Moresby. They understood the difficulty that they faced and that there was no vehicular road.¹⁴

Myth: The Australians inflicted huge losses on the Japanese.

Reality: From July to November 1942, Australian and Japanese battle casualties were about even, with around 900 each.¹⁵

Myth: The Japanese conducted the Kokoda campaign with a narrow supply margin.

Reality: The Japanese, from July to September 1942, were as supplied as the Australians were. Importantly, at a crucial stage of the campaign, rain in mid-September flushed away the Japanese supply line between Gona and Kokoda. No resupply was possible for two weeks.¹⁶

Myth: That Allied air power made a major contribution to the Japanese defeat.

Reality: Japanese casualty and battle damage reports show that losses to air attack were small.¹⁷

Myth: The Australians were medically better prepared and lost fewer men to disease.

Reality: The opposite is true. The Japanese lost fewer men to sickness during the campaign. For example, Australian dysentery cases compared to the Japanese were extremely high during the campaign.¹⁸

Lessons learnt

The Kokoda campaign provided many lessons, although two are historically significant. First, the experience of the campaign saw the Australian Army establish the Land Headquarters Training Centre (Jungle Warfare) at Canungra by the end of 1942.¹⁹ This was pivotal to the

¹² *Ibid.* p. 241.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 4-5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.

¹⁹ Anderson, N. 2014. *To Kokoda*. Newport, N.S.W.: Big Sky Publishing (Australian Army Campaigns Series), p. 203.

success of their operations for the rest of the Second World War. That is because for the remainder of the war, and for much of the next fifty years, their operations were jungle based.²⁰

Secondly, in the mind of the 2nd AIF, the campaign established the worth of Australia's militia forces. Until then the AIF had a disdain for the militia, seeing them as untrustworthy in combat.²¹ Differently, particularly the 39th and 3rd militia battalions involved in the fighting demonstrated to the AIF their courage through their tenaciousness. The militia and the AIF's shared Kokoda experience meant that respect and cooperation became the norm for the rest of the war in the Pacific.

Battle Honours

There is no single battle of Kokoda. That is because the campaign comprised four actions and three engagements. The actions and engagements are distinguished by a battle honour of the same name. Actions: *Isurava*, *Ioribawa*, *Eora Creek–Templeton's Crossing II* and *Oivi–Gorari*. Engagements: *Kokoda–Deniki*, *Eora Creek–Templeton's Crossing I* and *Efogi–Menari*. The Efogi–Menari engagement is often referred to as the Battle of Brigade Hill.

The battle honour *Kokoda Trail* is emblazoned on the Queen's Colours of the Australian Army Reserve's Royal Queensland Regiment, Royal New South Wales Regiment, Royal South Australia Regiment, and the Royal Western Australia Regiment. The Second World War imperial battle honour *Kokoda Trail* and its subordinate battle honour *Kokoda–Deniki* is shared with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force's Royal Pacific Islands Regiment.

Read more in: Williams, P. 2012. *The Kokoda Campaign 1942: Myth and Reality* (Australian Army History Series). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*