



A FILM BY ALISTER GRIERSON

# KOKODA

MATES BECAME HEROES. THE TRACK BECAME LEGEND.



# K O K O D A

## SYNOPSIS OF THE FILM

**K**okoda (Alister Grierson, 2006) is a 96 minute film set in Papua (New Guinea) in August 1942. Australia is at war with Japan. Port Moresby is under threat of invasion from Japanese forces who wish capture the airfields there and so dominate the region, preventing the build-up of United States forces on the Australia mainland and in the surrounding islands.

A small group of Australian soldiers from the 39th Battalion have been sent as a forward patrol beyond the defensive perimeter of Isurava, a village in the northern foothills of the Owen Stanley Ranges, astride the Kokoda Track.

The small section is cut off from their line of communication with the main force of the 39th Battalion. Isolated in the jungle behind enemy lines, they must attempt to make their way back through an unforgiving, hostile terrain to return to their mates. Allegiances form, strengths and weaknesses emerge and leadership battles threaten to destroy the group as the going gets tougher and tougher.

After three days with no food or sleep, carrying their wounded and suffering the effects of malaria and dysentery, they emerge from the jungle exhausted to the point of collapse. But then, on learning the situation is precarious at Isurava, they pick themselves up and move back to rejoin the battle.

## A SUGGESTED CLASSROOM APPROACH

A suggested approach for using this Study Guide in class is:

- 1 Introductory exercise – formulating ideas from photographs
  - 2 Locate and interview a veteran [see 2/16th web site [www.starwon.com.au/-skip](http://www.starwon.com.au/-skip)]
  - 2 Watch the film
  - 3 Film discussion: General questions about war, such as ‘Why did we fight: was it necessary [in 1942]?’
- AND/OR
- 4 Film discussion: Is *Kokoda* good history?
  - 5 Work through the problems in making such a film, and how they are addressed



**CURRICULUM APPLICABILITY** *Kokoda* can be used with senior students to explore the nature of war (in English, Society and Environment), and to explore the Kokoda Track element of the Battle for Australia (in Australian History). Students of Film Studies will also be able to explore how a feature film is made. Teachers need to be aware that the film contains occasional crude language, and war-related violence.



## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This summary can be used as a teacher reference, or can be given to students to use with the exploration of the film as a representation of history.

In 1939 Australia declared war against Germany for its invasion of Poland. Volunteers were called for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Infantry Force (AIF), and the 6<sup>th</sup> Division was formed and sent to north Africa. The 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>

were later sent there also, and the 8<sup>th</sup> Division to Malaya, based in Singapore. The CMF, or militia, were soldiers who were to be kept within Australia for home defence.

In December 1941 Japan entered the war with its invasion of areas of south-east Asia. The Japanese quickly forced the surrender of the Allied forces in Singapore (including the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division — over 15 000 men

and some nurses), and continued to conquer the area north of Australia.

By July 1942 Australia had only a few hundred soldiers, inexperienced, poorly trained and ill-equipped, in Port Moresby, the administrative centre of Papua.

The Japanese had by this stage of the war decided not to attack Australia directly; rather, their main aim was to disrupt American supplies and reinforcements to the area that would come through Australia. Their first attempts to take Port Moresby were ruined by attacks on their invasion force at Guadalcanal, and then in the Battle of the Coral Sea.

The Japanese now decided to attack overland, and landed troops at Buna and Gona on the Papuan north coast and in the following month they landed another force at Milne Bay.

The barrier between the Japanese forces in the north and Port Moresby on the south coast was the Owen Stanley Range — a steep, rugged series of mountains crossed only by a few foot tracks, the most important of which was the Kokoda Track. A small group of the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion and Papuan troops were sent to secure the vital air field at Kokoda.

The 39<sup>th</sup> were poorly equipped for the task. They had insufficient clothing for the wet, freezing nights, and their khaki uniforms stood out in the jungle. They had quinine as protection against malaria, but the main problem was dysentery, for which they had very few medical supplies.

Re-supply was in fact a major aspect of the campaign. Motor transport could carry supplies and equipment as far as Owers' Corner, then mules were used to Uberi, after which the tracks were too steep, and humans had to carry everything. Most of the carriers were Papuans, who would carry wounded back on their return journey.

The Japanese, with a numerically superior, well-trained and well-equipped force, overwhelmed the defenders. The Australians re-grouped, and re-took Kokoda in fierce fighting. However, they were again pushed back and forced to make a fighting retreat. The key now was to slow down the Japanese until reinforcements could arrive by foot up the treacherous mountain track.

**It is at this stage of the campaign, with the Australians retreating to Isurava and the Japanese about to overrun the defenders and seize Port Moresby, that the film *Kokoda* is set.**

The Australians now dug in around Isurava. The 39<sup>th</sup> were ordered to hold at all costs. They had lived for weeks without a change of clothing or proper food; their boots were holed and torn; their clothes were constantly wet; they slept without shelter or blankets; most were weakened by dysentery; ammunition was desperately short. One of the medical officers on the Track later described them as 'gaunt spectres with gaping boots and rotting tatters of uniform hanging around them like scarecrows. Their faces had no expression, their eyes sunk back into their sockets. They were drained by malaria, dysentery and near-starvation.' Reinforcements from the battle-experienced 2/14<sup>th</sup> Battalion arrived to relieve the weary, battered and bloodied 39<sup>th</sup>, but there were insufficient men to hold the area — so the 39<sup>th</sup> stayed on with them. For the first time the volunteer AIF and the conscript militia (or AMF) fought together.

The battle raged for four days. On the fourth day the Japanese were threatening to break through, until Private Bruce Kingsbury's bravery in charging the enemy, firing a Bren gun from the hip, and clearing the area. Kingsbury was then killed by a sniper's bullet. He was awarded the Victoria Cross, the first to be awarded on Australian soil (New Guinea was then a Protectorate of Australia).

This battle was a turning point. The delay in taking Isurava meant that the Japanese supply lines were now strained to breaking point. The Japanese General Horii had to throw his reserve forces into the attack. For the next two weeks the Australians began a fiercely fought 'cat and mouse' withdrawal from Isurava to Eora Creek.

By mid-September the Australians had dug in at Imita Ridge, only fifty kilometres from Port Moresby, the Japanese objective, and were ordered to hold that position. A fight to the death was expected but the Japanese, lacking sufficient supplies because of their extended supply line, and fearing an American attack on their base at Buna, now began to withdraw.

During November the Australians now pursued the Japanese through the stinking mud and treacherous, slippery tracks as they went back along the Kokoda Track. The Japanese advance through the rain-sodden jungles of Papua had been turned into a retreat but, even though many of them were sick and starving, it was always a fighting retreat. Finally, they made their last stand in the swamps of Buna, Gona and Sanananda. It had taken four months and the Australians had suffered 607 killed and 1015 wounded. For every man killed or wounded another two or three had been hospitalised for sickness. No overall figures for the 6000 Japanese soldiers on the Track are known.

The Australian advance was aided by the American 32nd Division which established bases to the south of Buna while the Australians pushed on down the Kokoda Track and across country from Wanigela. Gona was taken on 9 December and on 2 January 1943 Buna was captured. Sanananda, held by 600 Japanese, was not taken until 12 January. The total for the whole campaign was 2165 Australians killed and 3533 wounded.



## BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

Here is a set of photographs from the period and the place you are about to study — the Kokoda Track, 1942. (See photos on PAGES 6-8)

The images all illustrate aspects of the soldiers' experience of Kokoda. Look carefully at each and write a caption that summarizes what you can learn from each about the nature of jungle warfare on the Track. You should be able to cover a variety of aspects, such as weapons, the problems of supply, the nature of the terrain, evacuating the wounded, etc.

1 Look at each photograph, give it a

brief caption that explains what is happening, and then arrange them in an order that tells a story.

- 2 From these images, what do you think would have been the worst or hardest aspect of the experience?
- 3 For each image, brainstorm to identify the main emotions or feelings that might have been present among the men involved in that image.
- 4 Cut these images out and re-arrange them to tell a story.

5 Are there any main omissions or gaps in your story?

6 Imagine that a soldier who was on the Kokoda Track is coming to talk to your class. List some questions that you would ask him about the experience.

When you have finished this exercise look at the film *Kokoda* and see how it presents this experience.



### CAPTIONS FOR PAGES 6-8:

**A:** Kokoda Memorial, Isurava. **B:** AWM ART23615 25 *Brigade advancing along Kokoda Trail near Templeton's Crossing*. George Browning, 1944. **C:** AWM ART24074 *Kokoda Trail*. George Browning. Kokoda track; 25<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Brigade; members of a patrol from unit in brigade crossing a creek on the Kokoda Track. **D:** AWM P02423.009 Imita Ridge, Papua, October 1942. Two native carriers and a member of the 2/4<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance slowly climb the so-called 'Golden Stairs' towards loribaiwa. Each step was battened at its edge by a rough log which was sometimes broken and often slippery with a coating of mud. In

climbing the stairs, soldiers had to lift their leg over the log and put their foot down on the step behind in what was frequently a puddle of mud and water up to six inches deep. **E:** AWM P02038.144 Kokoda Track, Papua. 1942. Soldiers rest on a track while on patrol near Eora Creek. **F:** AWM 027003 Papua, New Guinea. September 1942. The Salvation Army in a forward area of the Owen Stanley Ranges. This very welcome tent, near Uberi, with its attendant cup of coffee and biscuits, was a great boon to the troops sick or wounded, going back from the front. **G:** AWM 013266 Eora Creek, Papua. 1 September 1942, Melbourne corporal J.A. Cauty of the AMF, 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion just before going into action against the

Japanese at Isurava in the Kokoda area. **H:** AWM 026320 Wounded members of the 39<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion making their way back along a jungle trail to the base hospital. They are all suffering from gunshot wounds sustained in the fighting against the Japanese in the Kokoda area. To reach the Hospital area they had to walk for nearly six days through thick jungle. **I:** AWM 026819 Papua, New Guinea, October 1942. Unknown soldier's grave on ridge between loribaiwa and Nauro. **J:** AWM 013642 23 November 1942. New Guinea, Kokoda Track. Wounded being brought in by native bearers. **K:** AWM 02719 Papua, New Guinea. October 1942. Douglas C47 transport plane of the United States Air Force dropping

food supplies on a cleared space at Nauro village during the advance of the 25<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Brigade over the Owen Stanley Range. **L:** AWM 013289 Members of the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion, AMF, parade after weeks of fighting in dense jungle during the Kokoda campaign. The officer in front is Lieutenant Johnson. The men's bedraggled dress reflects the hard fighting of past weeks.



A



B



C



● D



● E



● F



● G



H



I



J



K



L





STILLS FROM THE FILM *KOKODA* TAKEN BY JASIN BOLAND

## RESPONDING TO THE FILM

The film *Kokoda* has two main elements: it tells us about men at war; and it tells us about an aspect of a specific campaign, the Kokoda Track experience.

### What does *Kokoda* tell us about the nature of war?

**K**okoda shows a group of Australian soldiers on the Kokoda Track in Papua in 1942 (see map on following page).

They are part of a small force of poorly trained and poorly-equipped soldiers who have the task of holding up a far superior Japanese advance along the track from Kokoda to Isurava. The safety of Australia may depend on their being able to hold off the Japanese attack.

- 1 One dominant aspect of the film is the environment. How does the environment shape the nature of the war?
- 2 There is a strong tradition of mateship among the Australian soldiers. How is this idea of mateship both demonstrated and also challenged in the film? Discuss in particular the relationship between Jack and Darko.
- 3 War is described in the film as a ‘crucible’ in which character and people’s qualities are tested. Describe some of the qualities — positive and negative — that are seen during the film. For example, where do you see courage? Cowardice? Self-sacrifice? Selfishness? Etc.
- 4 One of the strongest qualities described in the film is duty or responsibility. But sometimes duty can pull a person in two different directions. How does Jack’s duty to his brother conflict with his duty to his country?
- 5 Leadership is an important characteristic in war. Where do you see examples of good leadership, and where are there examples of ineffective leadership?
- 6 The speech towards the end where Lieutenant-Colonel Honner addresses the men of the 39<sup>th</sup> praises the men. Do you think it is an effective speech? Explain your reasons. You could compare it with a speech given in similar circumstances, where a small group of



<http://www.kokodawalkway.com.au/stations/map.html>

men are facing extraordinary odds to succeed, in Shakespeare's 'St Crispin's Day speech' from *Henry V* – read or listen to it at [www.americanrhetoric.com/MovieSpeeches/moviespeechhenryV.html](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/MovieSpeeches/moviespeechhenryV.html)

- 7 One of the key relationships in the film is between Jack and Darko. What aspects of war does this clash between the two men reveal?
- 8 We never get to see the enemy clearly in *Kokoda*. Suggest why not.
- 9 What is the dominant image that is presented in the film? Is it that war is ennobling? Or a necessary evil? Or horrific? Or some other idea or combination of ideas? Discuss and explain your answer.

### Is *Kokoda* good history?

*Kokoda* is a film about war and what happens to men during it, but it is also a representation of the Australian experience of the Kokoda Track. For many people this may be the only knowledge they have of that historical event. Does the film present an accurate and fair representation of it?

- 1 Look at the historical background document, on pages 3-4, outlining the nature of the campaign in Papua of which the Kokoda Track fighting was a part. Does it matter that *Kokoda* focuses only on one tiny part of the campaign? Explain your reasons.
- 2 The 39<sup>th</sup> are often described in historical accounts of the period as badly trained, badly equipped, young and inexperienced. Does the film endorse this view? Give specific examples to support your conclusion.
- 3 Look at the following documents on aspects of the Kokoda experience. Discuss and decide the extent to which *Kokoda* does or does not reflect these aspects.

### A The Kokoda Track

Australians ... plunged into this obscure struggle for survival, have long since found that their enemies

are not the Japanese alone. Even to get within bayonet length of the Japanese is often a physical challenge which only a young athlete could hope to endure. The jungle has deadlier adversaries than the Japanese. It hits back at the fighting man with savage claws, with matted roots and vines and thorns, with tiger-toothed branches and barbed undergrowth; it mocks him with tremendous ribs of mountain, with vertical peaks, deep torrents, agonies of rock and marsh; it soaks him to the hide with whipping rain, it saturates him with sweat, it burns him with the incandescent heats and fevers, it cakes him with a pulp of loathsome mud.

It is full of malaria, ague, dysentery, scrub typhus, obscure diseases; full of crocodiles and snakes and bloated spiders, leeches, lice, mosquitoes, flies, all the crawling, creeping, leaping, flying, biting reptiles and insects that even suck human blood (and in the morning you make a habit of knocking your boots to shake the scorpions out). Its breath is poisonous; it stinks of rotten fungus and dead leaves turning softly liquid underfoot; mould and mildew put their spongy paws over everything; shoes, papers, clothing, sprout with grey beards, and there is a mottling of brown measlespots on the cigarette which sags from your mouth, if you've been lucky enough to find a cigarette.

Sometimes it's so wet that wood won't burn until it has been dried by the little flame which you keep smouldering almost permanently, like prehistoric man. Sometimes it's so hot that sweat trickles like brine over the lips. Sometimes it's so cold that your bones seem to chatter. Sometime it's so high that your ears hurt, you can't hear properly, you have to keep opening and shutting your mouth. At the end of the trail, the Japanese with knives and bullets. But the jungle enlists a thousand enemies before this last enemy of all. It is unending, unrelenting, unforgiving. It is maleficent. It is not made for man...

Clambering up the precipices, sometimes above ten thousand feet, loaded with forty or fifty pounds of battle gear is physical torture; slip-

ping and sliding down them is worse misery. Some of the ridges are so steep that thousands of steps have had to be gouged from their sides. At times, the ascent is so sheer that a man scrambles desperately on all fours, or claws with hands and feet to naked rock faces, his boots fumbling and scrabbling on the brink of an abyss. This is painful enough when it is not raining, which is seldom; in the wet, which is often, it is a nightmare road to war.

Clement Semmler (ed), *The War Despatches of Kenneth Slessor*, OUP, Melbourne 1987

### B Corporal Burns, 2/27<sup>th</sup> Battalion – Taking Wounded Back

Monday (21 September) arrived after a terrifically cold night. The boys were very restless all night especially Corporal Williams and I sat with him for the best part. The heat and flies were so bad that they almost drove us to the first stages of insanity.

Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> was one of our hardest days. The sun fiercer than ever and it took a lot out of the lads.

We had now used two of our last three dressings ... The lads had run out of smokes too and I collected a few likely looking leaves but I'm afraid they weren't quite the right type. Diarrhoea broke out during the day and we were lifting the poor lads for the next twenty-four hours without respite. Again I spent the night with Corporal Williams at 0800 hours he had a drink and at 0810 hours we found him dead.

Dudley McCarthy, *South-West Pacific Area – First Year*, AWM, Canberra, 1959, pages 251-2.

### C A Soldier of the 2/14<sup>th</sup> Battalion

Gradually men dropped out utterly exhausted – just couldn't go on. You'd come to a group of men and say 'Come on! We must go on'. But it was physically impossible to move. Many were lying down and had been sick ... Many made several trips up the last slope helping others.

Under the heavy loads the jolting caused by steps often more than a foot in height made shin muscles red

hot, while knees threatened to give way.

Dudley McCarthy, *South-West Pacific Area – First Year*, AWM, Canberra, 1959, page 195.

### D A Journalist's Description

It was seldom that anyone got a glimpse of the enemy. Most of the wounded were very indignant about it. I must have heard the remark 'You can't see the little bastards!' hundreds of times in the course of a day. Some of the men said it with tears in their eyes and clenched fists. They were humiliated beyond endurance by the fact that they had been put out of action before even seeing a Japanese. At Eora I saw a 20-year-old redhead boy with shrapnel in his stomach. He knew he had very little chance of being shifted back up the line. He called to me, confidentially: 'Hey, dig, bend down a minute. Listen ... I think us blokes are going to be left when they pull out. Will you do us a favour? Scrounge a tommy gun from somewhere, will you?'

It was not bravado. You could see that by looking in his eyes. He just wanted to see a Jap before he died. That was all. Such things should have been appalling. They were not appalling. One accepted them calmly. They were jungle war – the most merciless war of all.

Osmar White, *Green Armour*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988 pages 195-205.

### E A Survivor Remembers

Once a patrol of ours found one of our mates, who had been missing. He'd been tied to a tree by the Japs, with a length of bamboo forced into his backside. He was still alive, but died soon after. I went a little insane for a while and when we cornered some Japs later on, the things we did to them now seem horrifying – but I guess that's war (VX66349).

John Barrett, *We Were There*, Viking, Melbourne, 1987, page 439.

### F Gunner Wheatley, in New Guinea, on the 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels'

There is a tribute I, and I'm sure every soldier up here, would like to pay in

something more than words.

It is to the native. We call him a 'Boong' and honor him like a brother.

Without his loyalty, courage, and endurance I'm sure we could never have done so well up here.

I've seen these small, wiry, brown men. With their perpetual grins, carrying loads, which would make the average white man stagger, for hours at a stretch over rough, slippery mountain tracks.

I've seen them carrying, on stretchers, wounded men back to base and handling them as gently as a mother her child.

*Australian Women's Weekly*, 9 January 1943.

### G A Wounded Enemy

After a few bursts of fire the order came to fix bayonets, and it was then, for the first time, I became really frightened. The clash in the village was short and sharp with a few killed and wounded on both sides. One Jap was lying beside the track with both legs chopped from the trunk of his body, and where his legs should have joined the trunk there was just a mass of blood – he had been cut in half by a burst of .45 'Tommy' gun fire! His eyes were still open and had a terrified expression and he was moaning.

And then came the beginning of some of the terrible things that happen in combat. Our officer didn't have the stomach to finish off the dying 'Nip' – instead he detailed me to do it, and I have lived to this day with those terrified eyes staring at me.

Victor Austin, *To Kokoda and Beyond* MUP, Melbourne, 1988, page 125.

### H Extracts From Japanese Soldiers' Diaries and Notebooks

*One diary records the following:*  
'31 December 1942 – received 1 GO and 5 SHAKU of rice. I am tired of NEW GUINEA, I think only of home, I wish I could eat a belly-full. I have hardly eaten for fifty days, I am bony and skinny, I walk with faltering steps, I want to see my children.  
1 January 1943 – greeted the New Year, 1943. Received 2GO of rice,

Enemy bombing and trench mortars are giving our troops a punishment.

My comrades are crossing the seas  
To the shrine of KUDAN (1)

But I, like a caged bird,  
Cannot join them.

My comrades have been scattered by the winds,  
But they will bloom again as flowers of KUDAN (2)

My name was scattered too (3)  
But alas! I shall not come to fruition.

For my Sovereign and my Country,  
My name was lost on the battlefield,  
But I cannot lose this five-foot body of mine,

The comrades I talked with yesterday  
Have become protective Gods of the Nation;

I, alas, am not yet dead,  
And my carcass in enemy land still unburied.

(1) KUDAN – YASUKUNI Shrine is on KUDAN Hill, TOKYO, where all dead warriors are enshrined.

(2) Cherry blossoms symbolising the warrior

(3) Being presumed dead

*A soldier wrote:*

'Whenever and wherever I die, I will not regret it because I have already given my soul and body to my country and I have said farewell to my parents, wife, brother and sister.'

*Another wrote:*

'Whatever happens that may come to our country, to sacrifice one's life for his country is a soldier's realization of his long-cherished desire. When I received my mobilization orders, I had already sacrificed my life for my country. You must not expect me to return home.'

*A loose leaf from a notebook contains this:*

'To the enemy officer:

I am sorry to trouble you, but I beg you to bury my body, placing the head towards the north west.

I fought bravely till the last. The situation was unfavourable to us.

My end has come.'

*A Study of the Japanese Soldier* AWM 54 411/1/38



## Kokoda and the ANZAC Tradition

For many years Gallipoli was almost the only aspect of the ANZAC tradition that was recognized as significant. More recently, the Western Front experience of the AIF during the First World War has increasingly been commemorated; and most recently of all, there has been increasing awareness of the Kokoda Track as the ‘new Gallipoli’.

**H**ow is Kokoda being commemorated? And is this accurate and fair to the Kokoda veterans?

- 1 If you only had the film *Kokoda* as a guide, how would you commemorate Kokoda in a memorial? Decide on the location, the words and the symbols that you would use.

Now look at this information on the actual memorial.

### Salute at last to diggers who stemmed the tide

By Mark Forbes, Herald Correspondent in Isurava

‘We’ve been hidden in the clouds for sixty years,’ said Keith Norrish as the white shrouds crept up the Kokoda Valley, clinging to the mountainside like the mass of Japanese troops who tried to encircle him and his mates six decades ago.

After bureaucratic insults and years of silence, Mr Norrish and nine other veterans yesterday witnessed the unveiling of a memorial to those who fell in the campaign – men whose

deeds in the jungles of Papua New Guinea turned the course of World War Two.

John Howard was there, too, arriving by helicopter at a landing site hacked from the dense forest, greeted by bare-breasted tribal women and warriors beating drums. The Isurava people erupted in screams of ‘Howard, Howard, Howard’.

They see the memorial as a saviour for their remote region; a new gathering place for the young Australians who have turned Gallipoli into a sacred pilgrimage.

Chieftain Ivan Nitua invited them

to come, saying: 'The blood of our people is mixed in the earth of my land forever.'

It is a vision Mr Howard shares, telling the throng he hoped the memorial – four black marble obelisks marked courage, endurance, mateship, sacrifice – would become a 'magnet for young Australians, like other places, like Gallipoli'.

An emotional Mr Howard said the battles along the Kokoda Track in 1942, where a handful of hopelessly outnumbered boy soldiers—barely trained 'chokos' whom hardened troops joked would melt in the sun—and 500 veterans of the Middle East campaign 'injected hope and heart' into an Australia fearing invasion by the Japanese.

Mr Norrish sees Kokoda as the 'greatest fighting withdrawal in the history of the Australian army'.

It was a retreat he was lucky to make, having four machine-gun bullets ricochet off a steel mirror he had in his shirt pocket. 'Without it, it would have taken the heart, the lot.' With three bullets lodged in his stomach, one in his chest and another in his arm, Mr Norrish walked the muddy track for five days to safety ...

More Australians died in the campaign than at any other place during the war, said Dr Stanley [principal historian at the Australian War Memorial], describing the efforts of the 'choko' militia battalion as remarkable. 'They got beaten all the way back then turned north again. It's one of the great epics of Australian military history.'

History has reversed the war-time sledging by America's General Douglas MacArthur and the Australian commander General Thomas Blamey. Ignorant of the facts, they had berated their troops for not overrunning the Japanese, who outnumbered them six to one.

Col Blume, a private in the Kokoda campaign, remembered an address by Blamey after the Australians were pushed back initially, but only after buying vital time by fighting every inch of the way.

The general had told them they had been defeated by an inferior foe,

## 'KOKODA TRAIL' OR 'KOKODA TRACK'?

There has been a considerable debate about whether the difficult path that crossed the Owen Stanley Range should be called the 'Kokoda Trail' or the 'Kokoda Track'. Both 'Trail' and 'Track' have been in common use since the war. 'Trail' is probably of American origin but has been used in many Australian history books and was adopted by the Australian Army as an official 'Battle Honour'. 'Track' is from the language of the Australian bush. It is commonly used by veterans, and is used in the volumes of Australia's official history.

<http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/kokoda/>

saying: 'Remember, it's the rabbit who runs who gets shot.' 'We were just horrified,' said Mr Blume. 'We didn't think anybody would be so damn low.'

He and the thirty-one other members of his platoon had fought off waves of frenzied Japanese attacks. On 30 August, they counted more than 200 enemy bodies in front of their position.

Mr Blume had carried out his commander, Harold Bisset, who was hit by machine-gun fire, only to watch him die in the arms of his younger brother.

He remembered with awe the deeds of Private Bruce Kingsbury, who was awarded the first Victoria Cross in the Pacific theatre for his actions the day before. On the spot where the new memorial stands, the Japanese had finally broken through Australian lines, leaving nothing between them and Port Moresby.

Kingsbury had grabbed a Bren gun from a fallen comrade and raced into heavy machine-gun fire, shouting, 'Follow me! We can turn them back!' He mowed down more than thirty Japanese, forcing them into retreat, but as he stopped to talk to two men he had rescued a sniper fired a single shot into his chest.

Mr Howard said it was such indi-

vidual acts that saw Australia triumph, in conditions of almost unimaginable difficulty.

Mr Blume, like Mr Norrish, was gratified to see those who did not return remembered. 'I feel a lot more satisfied to see this memorial. I feel it's done something for their honour. They were mates.'

*Sydney Morning Herald* 15 August 2002.

- 2 The memorial comprises four black obelisks. Each has one of the four words: courage, endurance, mateship, sacrifice. Do you think these are appropriate words to use on the memorial? Are there other words that you might add? (see photo of the memorial on page 6)

[Look at this comment by a journalist who was on the spot in 1942.](#)

*I have always been annoyed by the prevailing belief that the Australian troops rallied magnificently and, beating the Jap at his own game, fought their way inch by inch back to Kokoda and eventually to Buna, Gona and Sanananda, in face of desperate opposition. The Australian soldier needs no fictions nor propaganda to justify him as a fighting man.*

*The Japanese fell back through the range from Eoribaiwa because their efforts to establish supply were doomed to failure from the start. They fell back because they were exhausted, diseased and starving. They had no combat air support, no artillery except a few mountain guns hauled in pieces up and down muddy precipices, no transport planes to drop them food.*

Osmar White, *Green Armour*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1988, page 208.

- 3 Does this comment diminish the Kokoda achievement? How might Jack or Darko respond to this statement?
- 4 During the film Colonel Honner says to the 39th: 'History will remember you.' Has it? Should it? Is *Kokoda* a fitting memorial to these men? Explain your ideas.

ASPECT	NEEDED	ACTUAL
Crew		
Script		
Finance		
Time		
Location		

DIAGRAM 1

## MAKING A FILM – BY MAKING DECISIONS

- 1 Imagine that you have been asked to make a film such as *Kokoda*. List all the aspects that you would need to work through, all the decisions that would have to be made. Consider such aspects as – a crew, script, finance, time needed, locations, etc. Add other headings to the list below, and complete your ideas in the ‘Needed’ column. (see Diagram 1)
- 2 Now read the following extracts from material supplied with the media Kit for *Kokoda*, and use it to complete the column headed ‘Actual’.
- 3 Do you think *Kokoda* is an effective film? Explain your views.

**An overview** Director, Alister Grierson, Producer, Leesa Kahn, Director of Photography, Jules O’Loughlin, Sound

Designer, Adrian Bilinsky, Composer John Gray and Editor, Adrian Rostirolla all met at the prestigious Australian Film, Television and Radio School and graduated in 2004.

In an industry that is notorious for taking at least three or four years to get an original feature film script up for a team of experienced players, the fact that *Kokoda* was written, financed, shot and distributed in less than two years is all the more remarkable.

**The origins** Grierson first became inspired by the story of *Kokoda* after his brother came back from walking the track and was astounded by the enormity of the history there and that it was still a predominately untold story from the Second World War. He began researching what he found to be an epic story of the struggle of

the unsung heroes of the ‘chocolate soldiers’. What became obvious very quickly was that it would be impossible to tell the whole story so he began thinking about a way ‘to collapse it down into something more accessible in ninety minutes, so we came up with a lost patrol concept/genre.’

**First draft** *We worked it out in treatment form, wrote the story for the lost patrol and gathered all the ideas together, then we approached John Lonie to write the first draft.*

Lonie quickly came back with a first draft which he supplied to Grierson: *It was fantastic and had a lot of the characters in there. In fact, it had too many characters so we had to reduce it down. I was able to come in and be in the luxurious position of being able to work it in to more of a genre struc-*

ture, fuse several of the characters into one and to build on it from there.

**Finance** Whilst Lonie and Grierson were working on fine tuning the script, Leesa Kahn met with Catriona Hughes' production company, GFN Productions, and supplied Hughes with a director's statement of Grierson's vision for the film.

Hughes needed no more encouragement 'I'll never forget. I was salivating with excitement because it was a director with a great vision, a high concept, the project was do-able and full of creativity.'

Then we had this incredible conversation about aiming to get the film released by ANZAC day 2006 and once that decision was made it set a whole series of timetables in place and we had to do a lot of financing very quickly and we had to go the funding bodies very quickly and had to cast very quickly.

To raise the rest of the funds Executive producer, Geoffrey Levy, a principal of GFN Films, drove into action a private sector campaign and Catriona and Leesa went to meet director of the independent film company, Palace, Antonio Zeccola.

**Final script** The final script was based on events that happened just prior to the battle of Isurava where one of several standing patrols who were positioned about an hour outside of Isurava got cut off from the main patrols when the battle began.

As Grierson explains:

*It's the nature of the terrain that's a constant theme of the battles in New Guinea, individuals and groups getting cut off from supply lines all the time.*

*So this patrol was cut off, not lost, and had to fight their way back over three or four days. In fact it was more than a patrol, it was about sixty men in the jungle fighting to get back to Isurava. When that group finally did get back to Isurava, they heard that the battle was going badly for the 39<sup>th</sup> battalion so even though they hadn't eaten or slept for three or four days and all of them had dysentery or malaria to some degree or another, they joined a parade of sick and wounded and made their*

*way back to join the battle because they thought that was what the 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion expected of them and the stakes were so high. That's a true story and that's what blew us away because we thought there's something really powerful in that, that captures the essence of the Kokoda experience, of course not having the resources to tell a massive story of about thirty or forty guys we reduced it down to a unit of about ten men who operate as this patrol.*

**Design** Grierson was aware that trying to make the film on location would have been impossible because the terrain is so unmanageable with steep rocky inclines and incredibly dense jungle but it is also quite alien with regards to the sounds, the light and the mood:

*It was really important for me to get the cinematographer, Jules O'Loughlin, there to see the light, to see the conditions, to start to develop his own idea of a palette that we could work with and the same for the sound designer, to listen to the place, to get a sense of it so that they could imbue the project with that.*

While there, O'Loughlin wanted to learn a little about:

*How it felt under the conditions which these guys fought in and also to go there to get a feel for the light, what it's like under the canopy, what the jungle canopy is like in New Guinea and the kind of light that permeates the canopy in different kind of conditions, what it's like when it becomes misty, what it's like at night, when it rains, all the different kind of atmospheric conditions that effect the play of light in the jungle.*

In addition to the New Guinea trip O'Loughlin also studied the accounts of campaigns by historians, particularly Peter Brune and archival photos and descriptions of the war from survivors. *There are a lot of accounts of servicemen who describe the conditions and the environment in which they fought. The environment played such a huge part in their experience. It was so hostile – the descriptions of how it felt at night, the intensity of the rain, the frequency and overpowering presence*

*of the jungle mist, the energy sapping humidity – that served as the starting point of how we were going to treat the film. In addition, I looked at the films of Damien Parer and the photographs of George Silk which gave us a real vision and an impression, a very realistic one, of what conditions were like there. Then from there we branched out and looked at a lot of films and got hold of a book called Images of War, which is a collection of Second World War paintings and that was a big influence on the look of the film.*

**Location** One of Grierson's major concerns was where, if not New Guinea, could they film that would allow them to recreate effectively the landscape? No one wanted to make a film that could not capture the essence of what these brave men did so it was fortuitous that their Production Designer, Nick McCallum was incredibly keen to be involved in the project, having read the script and he already knew of some great locations to introduce them to.

Grierson recalls looking at the images that McCallum had brought with him to their first meeting at Brisbane airport on their way back from New Guinea:

*We looked at the stills and we were just blown away as we thought 'wow that looks just like where we have just been' and he said 'well, that's in the hinterland of the Gold Coast', so after the meeting we organised another visit to Queensland for a recce. Nick drove straight to these locations and it was astonishing that these tiny pockets of rain forest exist in the hinterland. It was this strange experience of driving in right past someone's house and you think 'I can't make a movie here, there's a house and cows and dams just round the corner there' but it occurred to me that once you have contained the frame, you've got some incredible flexibility. We were able to find about ten different locations all within a small radius of each other that clearly represented New Guinea and that was just an amazing blessing.*

**Crew** The locations had magically



fallen into place very quickly and Nick McCallum not only brought his own wealth of experience, he also brought with him a very experienced Queensland crew that he had worked with previously.

**Cast** As a film written for a large ensemble cast it was also going to be of huge importance to secure a strong and talented cast of young men. For this they contacted respected casting director Nikki Barrett.

‘Nikki [Barrett] was really fabulous, Alister [Grierson] went in with a brief, and she presented accordingly and basically had cast the film in three weeks.’ ‘We did cast the net wide – we didn’t just focus on Sydney, we went around Australia.’

*Casting it was a challenge because once the script was out there every young male actor in the country wanted to be in the film. It was exciting to have access to that sort of calibre of actor and to generate that level of excitement. Difficult because, with an ensemble of ten, we had to see several hundred people to reduce that down. We hadn’t written it with anyone in mind and we were open to who would come along.*

**Rehearsal** Prior to filming, the actors had a two week rehearsal period, having already been on a diet and reading and looking at photos and footage from the Second World War so that they could immerse themselves in the theory of what had happened to these men.

The actual rehearsal period was very intense as they fought their way into character and the unfamiliar headspace of 1942 and being at war. They were taken away for three days by some SAS officers and given an introduction to the art of rifle practice and patrolling on boot camp. In addition to the regular scene rehearsals and costume fitting and character discussions of the rehearsal period, the actors also had the opportunity to meet some members of the original 39<sup>th</sup> battalion. This was probably one of the most important meetings in terms of bringing home to the young actors living in a modern world

exactly what these men went through, how it affected them and therefore the honesty and commitment that they needed to bring to their characters in order to respect their stories.

**Cinematography** For cinematographer, Jules O’Loughlin, it was a particularly difficult shoot because the whole film was shot on handheld camera to give the impression of the audience going with the film as if they were an unseen soldier.

*We’ve been on the side of hills where people are falling over and almost falling off the sides of cliffs and the camera man is holding an incredible weight on his shoulders, both literally and metaphorically, and about to fall off the hill and he’s harnessed and we’re all trying to look as if we’ve been on this terrain for a while and we are used to it and we’ve only been on it for half an hour. We were in the middle of jungles where you see red belly black snakes just slither past and funnel web spiders attacking members of the crew and people having to deal with circumstances like that while we are trying to get into the line of the film.*

*We wanted a real sense of immediacy with our characters and to that end we decided to shoot the film hand held.*

*The physical challenge of having to hold a handheld camera and move around with the actors in some of the places we were shooting was really difficult, on very steep slopes, at times on rocky terrain and moving throughout the jungle. It caused its own difficulties, not quite knowing where you were going to step at any time. The other element of handholding was a time consideration as we had to shoot the film really quickly and we knew that we’d be able to work a lot faster if we weren’t using tracks, dollies, cranes and the like. If the camera was on the shoulder we could just get in there and shoot these guys; be in there with them.*

**Costume** With little pre-production time it was fortunate that Phill Eagles, the costume designer, had worked on plenty of war films before including *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998)

*From my point of view, it’s now sixty years later, you can’t get the costumes. The main issue is our diet and our lifestyle has changed dramatically since then and people are now bigger and taller so physically our bodies have changed dramatically. Even if you can get clothing from the period, for example, a large man’s shirt in 1930/40s wouldn’t fit a small man here now our sizes have changed so much. So I had to source some fabrics without actually having it woven and have it all made because our cast is present day bodies. For each of our characters, ten initially, they needed at least half a dozen shirts and shorts for themselves and stunt people, so that we could rig them for bullet hits. We had to have the clothing made up and then have it broken down and then maintain that breakdown through the duration of the filming.*

**Direction** The film had to be shot in a total of twenty-eight days so the filmmakers decided early on they couldn’t afford to stop for wet weather. Rain or shine, through mud and mist, all of the crew and the cast persisted as best they could, filming in some terrible conditions, but for most this was blessing in disguise.

Simon explains:

*The Kokoda trail is known as one of the most difficult terrains for warfare in the history of mankind and it wouldn’t be right to make a film on a location that wasn’t equally as difficult or almost as difficult. So we did have incredibly tough times.*

The primary concern for Grierson was to take everyone to an environment where they would be able to work to the best of their ability and then back off:

*I realized that filmmaking for me is trying to provide those conditions for all of your craftspeople and just to kind of get out of the way. When you’ve got great cinematographers like Jules [O’Loughlin], great composers, sound designers, fantastic actors, great production designers, what can you do? Just give them the environments, give them the materials, tell them ‘this is what we want to do’ and try and steer a steady path.*

**Meanings** A motto from a memorial at Kokoda summed up the film for Grier-son and, he hopes, the film will allow people to develop a greater understanding of the story of Kokoda. *There are four pillars at Isurava and each pillar has a single word and those words are courage, mateship, endurance and sacrifice and that encapsulates the experiences of Kokoda and that's what we really wanted to focus on. The other things that aren't mentioned are the things that you have to battle through as humans when you are there, like fear and hope and terror and excitement. That's why we tried to write a story based around trying to explore all of those things and give each character a moment to have one or two or three of those moments, so that in the ensemble, the viewer gets the chance to experience all of those moments through the film.*

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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### Film

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*The Men Who Saved Australia - 4 Corners* Reporter: Chris Masters. Producer: Jacqueline Hole.

Articles on Damien Parer's Kokoda Frontline <http://www.hyperhistory.org/index.php?option=displaypage&Itemid=696&op=page> [http://sunday.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/feature\\_stories/article\\_1540.asp](http://sunday.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/feature_stories/article_1540.asp)

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<http://ajrp.awm.gov.au/AJRP/AJRP2.nsf/Web-Pages/HomePage?OpenDocument>

<http://www.kokodatreks.com/history/thekokodacampaign.cfm>

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