



A SNAPSHOT OF AUSTRALIA'S MILITARY EFFORTS

Compiled from various sources

Prior to the start of World War II, Australians realised that if Japan wanted to strike into Southeast Asia (to secure raw materials) they could easily do so while Britain was preoccupied by a European War. This fear became a reality at the end of 1941.

The advance of Japanese forces shocked the western world. They attacked the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour in December 1941 and secured the Malay Peninsula with the fall of Singapore by February 1942. They next planned to advance to Port Moresby, which would facilitate the capture of other centres and weaken the Allied line of communication from the United States to Australia.

However, the Battle of the Coral Sea spoiled Japan's plans to take Port Moresby by a seaward assault so they changed their plans to a military attack over the Owen Stanley Ranges, via the Kokoda Track.

On July 21, 1942, Japanese troops landed in the Gona-Buna area and Australia's 39th Militia Battalion (untrained and untested troops who were initially deployed to PNG to assist with the building of an airstrip at Dobodura) were forced into a series of short but critical engagements with the advancing Japanese troops as they are pushed along the Kokoda Track.

After fighting to hold and retake the village of Kokoda and its airstrip, the 39th Battalion withdrew to Isurava.

Reinforcements were sent from Port Moresby: first the 53rd Battalion to protect a side track behind Isurava, then the veteran 2/14th and 2/16th Battalions that had previously served in the Middle East.

During the last days of August, the 39th and the 2/14th Battalions (with support from the 2/16th and 53rd Battalions) temporarily held the Japanese during intense five-day action at Isurava. On August 29, in the face of yet another enemy assault, Private Bruce Kingsbury from the 2/14th Battalion was killed as he rushed forward with his Bren Gun to drive back the enemy in a

determined counterattack. For his bravery he was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, the first VC awarded during the New Guinea Campaign.

Throughout September, the Australian units withdrew down the Kokoda Track and were joined by the 2/27th Battalion. They made further stands against the Japanese at Eora Creek, Templeton's Crossing, Efogi, Mission Ridge and Ioribaiwa.

Allied airmen dropped supplies and made repeated attacks on the enemy's supply lines. During those gruelling days, Papuan men were employed as carriers and played a vital role in the battle. They carried supplies forward to the troops and ferried the increasing numbers of wounded and sick back to safety. They became known as the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels and became an icon of the track.

Finally, by September 16, after yet more troops had come from Port Moresby and dug themselves into a defensive position at Imita Ridge, the Japanese were exhausted. They had almost run out of supplies in their fight to cross the mountains. Following setbacks on other battlefields against allied forces that robbed them of further reinforcements, the Japanese troops on the Kokoda Track were eventually ordered to withdraw. When Australian patrols pushed forward of Imita Ridge on September 28, they found that the enemy had slipped away.

During the next six weeks, the Japanese fell back over the mountains pursued by troops from the 25th Brigade (comprising the 2/25th, 2/31st and 2/33rd Battalions), the 16th Brigade (comprising the 2/1st, 2/2nd and 2/3rd Battalions), the 3rd Battalion, and men from medical and supply units. Significant actions were fought at Templeton's Crossing, where it took more than a week of hard and costly fighting for the 25th Brigade to push the enemy back; and at Eora Creek, where the 16th Brigade doggedly attacked enemy strongholds and slowly made ground.

To add to the difficulties of jungle warfare, Australian troops were plagued by supply shortages; however, on November 2 Kokoda village was finally retaken. The Australians had one more tough battle to fight at Oivi-Gorari, where the Japanese were determined to make a final stand.

By November 18, the Australians reached the Kumusi River, and the battle for the Kokoda Track was won.

The Australian military was then assigned the task of advancing further and capturing the coastal villages of Gona and Sanananda. For a further two months, what was left of the 21st and 25th Brigades and the 39th Militia joined forces with the 18th Brigade from Milne Bay, and

fought in oppressive conditions, suffering further casualties until the final defeat of the Japanese in Papua New Guinea on January 23, 1943.

More than 600 Australians were killed and some 1680 were wounded in what some believe was the most significant battle fought by Australians during World War II.

The crucial triumphs along the Kokoda Track stemmed the Japanese tide of conquests, and the bloody beach side battles signaled an end to Japanese military initiatives. By the end of January 1943, the path of future conflict stretched away from Australia, instead of towards it.