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THE MYTHS OF KOKODA

Written by Paul Ham



Australia correspondent for the London SUNDAY TIMES, PAUL HAM, is the author of KOKODA published by Harper Collins. The paperback edition of the book hit the stands in August. It has received rave reviews in national and international media. The Courier Mail says, "If you read one book about the Kokoda Track this should be it..." According to The Age, "Ham's work stands above the rest and will quite possibly become recognised as the book on Kokoda. Authoritatively researched, intelligently structured and beautifully written." Paul has been a long time FCA member and is presently working on a

history of Australia's role in the war in Vietnam.

Myth 1: The Kokoda Track was a little-known jungle path, barely walkable, that few white people had heard of.

The path was said to be a 'green hell', 'the steepest', 'toughest', 'most treacherous' etc. 'There is no language equipped to portray its many perversities' wrote one early historian. And no doubt the jungle path has exhausted - perhaps reduced to tears - many modern-day trekkers, celebrities and executives attired in the latest hiking gear.

But in fact, the Kokoda Track breaches one of the less forbidding sections of the Owen Stanley Ranges,

crosses many delightful streams and passes through a landscape of extraordinary beauty. As Hank Nelson observed, 'it was a long way from being the worst track in Papua and New Guinea - it was not broken-bottle limestone country, it did not require a day or two wading in swamps and sleeping in trees.' Pretty little tribal villages appear at welcome intervals along the route, offering fruit and vegetables. It was well known to Australians at the time - gold diggers, traders and missionaries used it regularly. The only people, it seemed, who knew little about the track were Allied Intelligence, who thought they could blow up one of the mountain gorges and thus stop the Japanese advance over the Owen Stanleys.

These facts are inconvenient for writers who wish to perpetuate legend rather than foster truth. However, it is true that the track passes through extremely tough country; and it is barely imaginable to consider fighting a war here, over steep mountains through densest jungle. How would supplies be brought in? How would the wounded be got out? War had never been fought in such country. The wounded would suffer unspeakable agony on their struggle back over the mountains.



Long after the war, Australian Colonel Ralph Honner confided sadly, 'If we'd had helicopters we could have saved half the men we lost in the Owen Stanleys.'

Myth 2: The Aussies were all bronzed heroes and great fighters at Kokoda.

Certainly the great majority were brave in the extreme. Two Victoria Crosses were won in Papua; one section of the 2/14th Battalion remains the most highly decorated in Australian military history.

But most histories of Kokoda fail to record the experience of the men of the 53rd Battalion. These poor blokes were fatally compromised from the start: scorned by the army's top brass and laughed at by civilian Australia, they, along with other militia units, were dubbed 'chocos' or chocolate soldiers who would melt in battle.

They were mocked because they'd refused to volunteer to fight for the Mother Country, overseas. But New Guinea was effectively an Australian colony. On the eve of their departure some 100 or so went AWOL-absent without leave - in Sydney. And they were replaced by a few vagrants homeless malcontents who were dragooned off the streets of Sydney and given no time to say goodbye to whoever may have loved them. They were simply herded onto the ships and a few months later sent over the Kokoda Track - barely trained and utterly demoralised - to face the crack troops of the Japanese Imperial Army.

At the sight of the enemy, a whole company of these men threw down their weapons and ran into the jungle. Some were found by the side of the track quaking with fear and unable to move. The same happened to hundreds of American troops who later landed at Buna. Scores hid in the jungle refusing to fight.

One doesn't judge these men; it was a gross failure of military leadership, which neglected adequately to train them or lead them. A soldier, if he is expected to kill, must be properly trained, and properly led. But my

discovery of the 53rd Battalion's court martial documents - yes, four Australian officers were court-martialled for cowardice and desertion - showed the other side of the Anzac legend.

Myth 3: The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels came out of their villages voluntarily to help the white man.

At their best, the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels literally saved the lives of over a thousand Australian soldiers. This went well beyond the call of duty. Not only did they carry out the severely wounded on stretchers, over some of the toughest country. They cared for their patients. At night they'd build shelters over the patient to protect him from the torrential rain. They prepared meals, rubbed bush medicines into wounds, and offered friendship.

But as always there is another side to the truth, and as historians we must address it. The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels were not all smiling natives who benignly nursed the troops without complaint (though a lot were). Many had been brutally treated by the Australian Government before the war, and forced to carry huge loads to plantations and goldfields. Some were bitter. The first teams of carriers were badly treated and 'desertions were frequently reported'.

Nor did they simply drift down from their villages and happily give their time - and sometimes their lives - to save the white man. Very few were volunteers. The native people understandably dreaded the war. In fact, they were indentured labourers, a form of paid slavery.

On 15 June 1942, Australia's National Security Control Regulations Act provided for 'the conscription of whatever native labour might be required by the [Australian armed] services.' This gave near-dictatorial powers to Australia's regional officers, who could harness 'any native upon such work and subject to such conditions not inconsistent with the order as he may see fit'. The clause was open to wide interpretation by bored white 'old New Guinea hands' and latent slave drivers. Some contracts were for three years.

A native who refused to work, deserted, 'absented himself without leave' or worked in 'a careless or negligent manner' faced severe fines and imprisonment. The grinding reality of carrying broken men over the Owen Stanleys rendered these penalties absurd. They worked like Trojans. They responded to perks and incentives, and one reason they liked the Australians had nothing to do with their putative affection for their colonial masters; it was simply that they were allowed to take any damaged goods dropped at Myola - the Australians' daily drop zone for supplies back to their villages, as a kind of bonus.

And of course, the Japanese treated them, in general, far worse, driving them at bayonet point to carry huge loads.

The terms of native 'contracts' were imposed with brutal, if necessary, efficiency. The Australians hunted and summarily executed those natives accused of betrayal and collaboration with the Japanese. One native man was hanged as a traitor in Isurava.

There was a cruel catch-22: the natives were executed by the Japanese if they refused to collaborate; and imprisoned or executed by the Australians if they were found collaborating. Either way they died.

The natives were mortal, not superhuman; many fled the bombs - the hellish sound of which was so alien to their world - and rejoined their villages.

Myth 4: The Japanese Imperial Army were all inhuman brutes, indestructible, and the most disciplined soldiers in the world.

Many Japanese units - especially the commando units - inflicted unspeakable suffering on the enemy. The

atrocities of the Japanese soldiers in Papua are well documented - and the impression they've bequeathed is of a homogenous band of sadists, monsters and rapists, who obeyed the most obscene orders without question. Many of them were these things - consider the bayonet practice on Australian prisoners at Rabaul; or the slow mutilation of natives at Milne Bay.

But not all Japanese soldiers were blind robots programmed to obey without question the most monstrous orders. Some - among them teachers, farmers, doctors - were capable of seeing what was happening around them; their diaries reveal their abhorrence of the cruelty of senior officers. They knew what they were doing. Some even began to resist their superiors.

Astonishingly the Japanese army fielded a journalist at the Kokoda frontlines called Okada Seizo, who was a closet pacifist, and hated the war. He charted the soldiers' collapse with unsparing detail.

Japanese troops began to wonder why they had shed so much blood for a place of no consequence at the extremity of the Empire. One Japanese officer wrote of the battle for Papua, 'When you look around, there is no agriculture. No towns. what possible plus can our occupation of such a place offer to our national strength? Yet even given that, here we are, two large groups of white and yellow fighting over the Giruwa area, flinging the fires of war at each other. what on earth is all this for? That soldiers had to die so horribly to secure such a completely worthless piece of land! What is the bloody sense of that?'

By January 1943, the Japanese soldiers' rice ration had disappeared. They then ate shellfish, coconuts and horsemeat and, when they exhausted these, roots and bark, and human flesh taken from Australian and American corpses, which acquired the nickname 'white pork'.

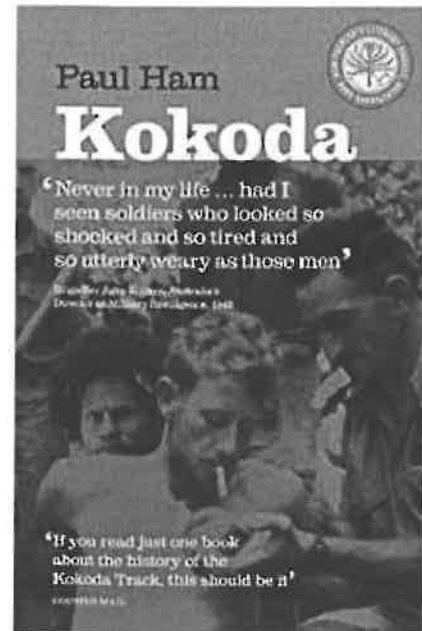
Morale swiftly collapsed when the food ran out. Arguments flared with officers, who seemed always to be fed. Military order dissolved into 'a snarling scramble for the means of existence'. These were not isolated instances: Borneo, New Britain, Saipan and the Philippines experienced the same pattern of collapse. The starving men reacted furiously to their sense of abandonment by officers, whose cowardice and greed shed a new light on the sacred myth of Japanese duty and self-discipline.

Wada Kiyoshi, an excruciatingly honest private of the 144th Signal Unit, scribbled through his suffering on the Papuan shores: 'all officers eat relatively well. The majority are starving the higher officials are not starving. This is indeed a deplorable state of affairs for the Imperial Army.'

In this sense, it can be said that many Japanese officers deserted their men at Sanananda on the north coast of Papua at the end of the campaign, and not the other way around.

The most senior commanders were scorned: colonel Yazawa was 'a bawling old buffoon'; Tsukamoto, a crapulent drunk. Lieutenant Watanabe Fukuichi was so disgusted by Yazawa that he told his Allied interrogators, 'he had the habit of ordering his troops to advance and hiding himself in a hole like a rat during the action.' The men called him '2nd class private Yazawa'.

I went to Japan to meet some of these men. I attended a reunion of the 144th Regiment - ordinary infantry soldiers, in the main. There were about a dozen left. They claimed not to remember the atrocities at Rabaul



and Milne Bay- which in their case was possibly true, since their units weren't involved. They expressed great admiration for the Australian soldier. 'Never had we experienced such resistance, not in all the battles down the Pacific,' said one.

Of all the questions I get asked about Kokoda, the one that crops up most often is why did I bother to write about the Japanese?

The reasons are clear. How should we understand the clash of cultures and the motives governing the behaviour of the antagonists, if we do not examine both sides? How may we grasp an understanding of the political forces behind the apparent madness and brutality, if we do not consider the intentions of the opponents? How indeed can we comprehend the courage, fear, self-sacrifice of our own troops if we do not appreciate what they were being thrown against?

Any history of conflict that does not consider both sides is, to use a crude metaphor, akin to a champion boxer, alone in the ring, hurling punches at shadows, while the nation applauds his legendary courage in a vacuum. Legends must be tested, or they simply become bags of Aeolian wind, breathing untruths down the centuries.

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