

The Kokoda myth



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Accounts of the war in Papua often neglect reality.

By Steven Bullard



Peter Brune's *A bastard of a place* (2004) opens with an archetypal Australian "digger" moving through the devastation of the battlefield at Sanananda in early 1943. The passage is confronting and the actions he describes brutal: "Three of the Japanese had maggots in their mouths and eyes, while the fourth just lay with his eyes shut. The digger belted the fourth soldier on the head, his eyes opened with a start, and one of the digger's mates shot him."

While the passage illustrates the violent, uncompromising nature of the war fought in Papua, Brune elevates such actions, at Kokoda, Milne Bay, Buna, Gona and Sanananda, to the level of national myth. He laments that many are still ignorant of this "great Australian legend", where we fought "not for the birth of a nation, but for its very rites of passage".

The campaigns have been variously called Australia's Agincourt, Australia's Thermopylae – even Australia's Alamo; analogies chosen not for the resemblance to these battles, but for the way they resonate within popular conceptions of national myth and collective identity. Stories of this kind thrive on extremes: the harshest environment, the strongest adversary, insurmountable odds, and dire consequences for failure. To believe so many accounts, like Brune's, the consequences of failure in Papua in 1942 would have been dire indeed: the

invasion of Australia by Japanese forces and the subsequent loss of freedom that we take for granted. Or would they?

It is well documented that the Japanese had neither the intention nor the capability to invade Australia during these campaigns. The Japanese wanted Port Moresby to protect their main base at Rabaul, to secure the seas in the area to enforce a blockade between Australia and mainland United States, and to use it as a base from which to destroy those airfields in the north of Australia which would likely have been used to mount an Allied counter-attack. Of course, the Australian troops, general populace, government and even military planners at the time were not privy to this information. They believed, as did some of the Japanese troops, that invasion was planned, if not inevitable.

This is not to say that Japanese commanders had not canvassed the idea of invasion. In early 1942, middle-ranking members of the Navy General Staff proposed to continue the momentum of the Japanese drive south by invading and occupying all or part of the Australian mainland. The proposal was discussed and presented to the army, prime minister and emperor at various conferences and meetings during February and March. Not all in the navy were happy with the proposals. A key objector was Yamamoto Isoroku, the commander of the Combined Fleet, who preferred a push east to finish the job of destroying the United States

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George Browning, *25 Brigade advancing along Kokoda Trail near Templeton's Crossing* (1944, oil on canvas on plywood, 51.6 x 62.2 cm AWM ART23615).

This painting of an Australian soldier stepping over a mutilated corpse depicts the grim reality of the Kokoda campaign, but with triumphalist overtones.

Above left:

Australian soldiers were motivated by a belief that their actions were saving Australia from invasion. AWM 027058

Above right:

Popular conceptions of the campaigns in Australia are dominated by images of "fuzzy wuzzy angels" assisting wounded troops. AWM 014249



Above left: Few Australians comprehend the experience of ordinary Japanese soldiers during the campaign. Photo courtesy of *Greater East Asian War: pictorial records of the naval operations – Book II*

Above right: Japanese troops were devastated by their failure to reach Port Moresby over the Owen Stanley Range. Photo courtesy of *Greater East Asian War: pictorial records of the naval operations – Book II*

Pacific Fleet, or even west to Ceylon to cut British supply lines to India. The army objected strongly on the grounds that the navy had severely underestimated the amount of troops and shipping required to support the proposed operations.

In any case, the proposal was shelved, and effectively abandoned, four months before the first of the Japanese troops landed at Buna and Gona in July 1942. By then, Japanese losses at the naval battle of Midway had caused the abandonment of plans to occupy Fiji, Samoa and New Caledonia, the cornerstone of operations intended to blockade mainland Australia and cut it off from the United States. In early August, the Allied counter-offensive had begun in the Solomon Islands. By late August, Japanese commanders at Rabaul had realised the seriousness of the threat on Guadalcanal. Reinforcements meant for the operations in Papua, including Milne Bay, were diverted in an attempt to retake the island. It could be said that the Japanese wanted Port Moresby, but they could not afford to lose Guadalcanal. Elsewhere, the war in China and Burma continued to consume valuable Japanese resources, while the threat of the Soviets entering the war was an increasing burden on overextended logistics systems.

Many Australian accounts, however, do not place the campaigns in Papua within a wider context, fail to examine Japanese strategy, and rarely document the personal experience of Japanese soldiers. This often results in an unbalanced assessment and even glorification of the battles.

Lex McAulay, one of the few to present the Japanese side of the story, acknowledges

the debate concerning invasion in *Blood and iron* (1991), but then dismisses it out of hand, stating matter-of-factly that “quite probably, in due course, Australia would have been occupied rather than invaded, and a system of administrators installed”. It is difficult for this assertion to be maintained in the light of the historical evidence.

Paul Ham is the latest to add to the considerable body of literature on the Papua campaign with his recently published *Kokoda* (2004). Despite some errors of fact, the often-sensational tone, and the loose application of sources, Ham attempts to smash some myths of the campaign through presenting the Japanese side of the story. The reader is confronted with an “enemy” with names, family background, and human emotions placed alongside our Australian “heroes” in battle.

While most have applauded his approach, it does not sit easy with those for whom the campaigns have taken on a sacred nature. A recent review in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by historian Michael McKernan actually criticised Ham for his “even-handedness”. For McKernan, being presented with the details of the Japanese experience compels us to “grieve for suffering humanity at both ends of the track”, but this somehow devalues for him the “excitement, the glory [and] the tragedy” of the Australian narrative.

Kokoda is fast becoming as emotive a term as Gallipoli, and as infused with ideas of nationalism and what it means to be Australian. In its most fundamental form, however, such nationalism is not conducive to tolerance, reconciliation and diversity. In other words, there is little place in such writings for the perspective and experiences of former enemies. Osmar White, a first-hand observer of the campaigns in Papua in 1942, was one who saw beyond this narrow gaze, and was moved to ponder whether “all men were creatures of the spirit, eternal and indestructible as the stars”. The sacrifice in these campaigns of Australians, as well as Japanese, Papuans and others, deserves such a noble sentiment.

Only when we see Kokoda in its proper historical context can we avoid easy assumptions about what the enemy we faced in 1942 intended and come to a fitting understanding of what the war was like for them, as well as for the Australians. It is in our own interests to achieve both these things. 🏰