

KOKODA A JAPANESE TRAGEDY

The South Seas Force met more than it anticipated in Papua and was pushed to the brink of despair. **By Steve Bullard**

Facing page, left:

The Japanese miscalculated the quality of the roads into the Owen Stanley Range. All supplies and equipment were carried by packhorse or by human labour.

Facing page, right:

Some attempts were made for specialist training in jungle warfare. Beds such as these, however, proved too complex for exhausted troops, most of whom were lucky if they found a suitable place to rest.

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Superior Private Takahashi Eijuro ceased his foraging as a single gunshot echoed from the jungle behind him. He knew instinctively that his wounded company commander, whom he had half-carried, half-dragged during the last week before an incessant wave of Australian pursuers, had fulfilled his wish to die for the Emperor. Surely Takahashi would be next. With almost the last of their strength, Takahashi and his sergeant used a sword and their bare hands to bury the commander in a shallow grave by the river, before pressing aimlessly on to an unknown fate.

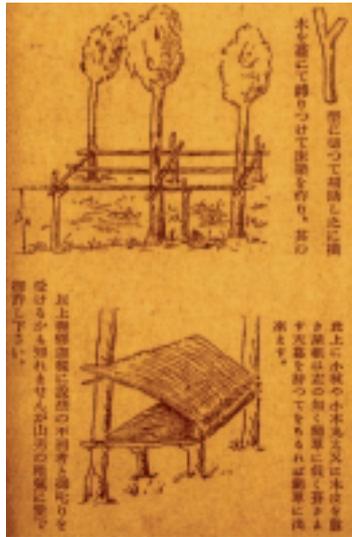
Takahashi was attached to the Signals Company of the South Seas Force that, under the command of Lieutenant General Horii Tomitaro, was ordered to capture Port Moresby by the perilous and largely uncharted overland route through the Owen Stanley Range. The rugged jungle-covered mountains, an increasingly problematic supply situation, the stubborn resilience of the Australian enemy, and the willingness to fight to the last man where no hope of retreat or evacuation remained; all these factors accounted for the lives of more than 12,500 Japanese troops from the time the advance party landed on the north coast of Papua in July 1942 to the annihilation of the force by February the following year.

Expectations were initially high among the spirited South Seas Force, which had invaded and occupied Guam and Rabaul with relatively few losses. The Australian enemy was known from wartime propaganda to be a good bushman, an expert horseman and a crack shot, not to mention his genetic predisposition to adventure and murder owing

to his convict background! The Australian reliance on material strength on the battlefield, however, was expected to be no match to the spiritual strength of the Japanese soldier. Despite this, the Australians at times won respect for their bravery and their unexpected fighting spirit. At other times, the desire for revenge for constant Allied air attacks or for the death of a comrade left a trail of brutal treatment of those unfortunate Australians left behind or captured.

Months of training and drill, trust in one's physical strength and loyalty in one's comrades were insufficient preparation for marching into battle in the mountains of Papua. Motor transport was limited to some coastal areas around Buna. Transport to Kokoda and beyond was by packhorse, villagers procured from Rabaul, and Formosan and Korean labourers. Everything but essential food, ammunition and equipment was soon discarded from the 50-kilogram loads soldiers were expected to carry, including luxuries such as mosquito nets and spare boots.

Starvation and disease became the deadliest enemy for the Japanese in Papua. The staple of the Japanese soldier was polished white rice, supplemented with dried bean paste (miso) and soy sauce powder, barley, tinned fish and meat, and sometimes hard-baked biscuits and bread. The Japanese military doctrine of minimum support meant that troops mostly carried and prepared their own food during the campaign. Groups of soldiers would huddle around concealed fires in the evening and pre-dawn darkness – to avoid smoke betraying their position – and cook their daily supply of rice. Local produce, such as



taro, potatoes, pumpkin, sugar cane and melon, was available at times early in the campaign, but the Japanese soldiers quickly became weakened and malnourished owing to a reduced diet deficient in essential vitamins and minerals.

him so far. Hunger, exhaustion, malaria, and the constant press of the enemy during the retreat over the next few months led many to plunge into despair beyond human endurance and to wish to escape the hell their lives had become. With little

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Evacuation and care of the sick and injured on the trail was stretched to breaking point. In mid-November 1942, the 500-bed Line of Communication Hospital at Giruwa, staffed by 57 medical officers and orderlies, was bursting with more than 2,000 patients. A steady stream of sick and injured arrived from battalion aid stations, even though short-term casualties were simply carried behind forward positions, to enable them to quickly rejoin their units. There were critical shortages of medical supplies, including the anti-malarial quinine and atabrine, and food resupply became more infrequent the longer the campaign lasted.

The men of the South Seas Force are said to have cried “banzai” and shed tears on the high ground past Ioribaiwa while gazing down on the twinkling lights of Port Moresby and the moonlight reflecting on the distant sea. At this point, Private Uehara Tetsunosuke was not alone in believing his superiors’ promises that his stomach would be filled if only he could fight on for another two or three days and reach Port Moresby. It was a bitter betrayal to receive the order to retreat when the prize was, in his mind, so close, and when so many of his comrades had fallen to bring

ammunition, little food, and little hope, they were forced back to their bases on the north coast, all the while scouring the land for food – eating “white pork”, a euphemism for human flesh, became a desperate attempt by some to sustain life.

With evacuation to Rabaul even of the sick and injured difficult, and the words of the Emperor to continue their resistance fresh in their minds, the garrison troops at Buna, Gona and Sanananda began a desperate last stand. Known in Japanese as *gyokusai*, a glorious sacrifice for the Emperor, these final battles resulted in many Allied casualties and the deaths of almost all the Japanese defenders.

Takahashi and Uehara were among the lucky ones. Not just for returning from the Kokoda campaign alive, but for surviving the times and being able to look back and question, with the insight of the passing years, the reason for their involvement. Survival, however, comes at a price. The faces of their fallen comrades and the memories of their own actions in the face of the enemy, will forever privately haunt them in a country where public expression and commemoration of the war is constrained by political and social fetters. 

WORLD BEYOND IMAGINING

Wada Kiyoshi was a soldier with a medical unit of the South Seas Force. His diary was captured by the Allies at Giruwa in January 1943. He was presumed to have died, and his diary was subsequently published in Raymond Paul's *Retreat from Kokoda* (Richmond, NSW, 1958). Wada, however, survived the war and later wrote of his experience in a regimental history, published in 1986.

There were many stories of tragedy from the battlefields of the Pacific War. While it's not possible to quantify and compare these, surely the campaign in New Guinea, with its long periods of starvation, relentless fighting and isolation, was a particular case. From early on at Giruwa there was no special medical care for sufferers of serious illness and injury, let alone for sufferers of malaria and diarrhoea. Try to imagine what was in the heart of the soldier, though there were naturally differences between individuals. One would expect all to have yearned for life in this situation. But many yearned for peace in death to ease the suffering of pain and hunger. One's field of vision became narrower and narrower, and among the growing pile of corpses, I too sunk to a place of spiritual torpor and physical immobility. It was a world beyond the imaginings of normal society.