

The Kokoda Trail

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This is the true story of the naming of that precipitous pathway over the Owen Stanley Range of mountains in Papua New Guinea, between Port Moresby in the south and Buna in the north: the scene of many bloody battles of the Owen Stanley Campaign in 1942.

There were three phases during the campaign, which began with the landing of the Japanese force at Buna and Gona 21 – 24 July 1942. This force was to find a way across the mountains to Moresby and apart from a small skirmish at Awala, cross the Kumusi River and attack the small force of a company of the 39th Battalion at Goiari and then on to Kokoda where a savage battle ended in the Australians withdrawing to Deniki. From then on savage battles at Isurava, Eora Creek, Mission Ridge, Brigade Hill and then finally the relief of the 39th Battalion and 21st Brigade at Iorabaiwa by the fresh 25th Brigade and the 3rd Battalion AMF. So ended the first phase of the Campaign.

The second phase, the advance of the 3rd Battalion and the 25th Brigade and the 16th Brigade from Iorabaiwa to the Kumusi River and beyond to Soputa; finally driving the Japanese into prepared fortress style defences at Buna, Gona and Sanananda.

This became the third phase known as the Battle of the Beaches. The most bitter battles were at Gona and Buna. Sanananda was more of a siege with the enemy well dug in to dugouts heavily reinforced with logs and some concrete. Casualties were very heavy at Sanananda more to malaria; dysentery and sandfly fever than bullets and bayonets. It was eventually mopped up in mid January 1943 by the Australians who cleared Papua of the enemy.

The winding path between Koitaki in the south and Buna, Gona in the north passes through many villages and camps on its tortuous way across the spine of the Owen Stanley Range and at its highest point reaches 7,000 feet at Templeton's Crossing all in the shadow of Mt Victoria at 14,000 feet. All through thick rainforest and impenetrable jungle.

Prior to WW11 according to tales told by the 'the old hands' miners, planters et al, all paths, tracks etc were called by the direction one was going, eg. Moresby Road, Buna Road, Kokoda Road.

During the campaigns of 1942-43 Milne Bay, Owen Stanleys, Wau, Salamaua, the War Correspondents were camped at the 7 Mile Airstrip and had to send their censored reports to Australia by cable. This entailed describing the battles along the way as huge enemy losses at Imita-Efogi-Myola. As there was no mores sign for the word 'hyphen' the word had to be signalled letter by letter in mores code making the account payable by the sender twice as high. One enterprising journalist. Geoff Reading was a keen fan of the tales of Tales of the Klondike by Jack London and others began using the word 'Trail' to refer to where the fighting was taking placed, eg. 'on the Kokoda Trail near the village of Efogi' or whatever. Our troops overcame stiff opposition etc. The editors back in Australia loved it and soon it became known as 'The Kokoda Trail'. Soldiers actually still fighting in New Guinea were receiving letters from home containing love and kisses and 'we hope you are not on that terrible Kokoda Trail'. Anyone wanting to confirm this has only to go to the Mitchell Library and see copies of newspapers of that period. Meanwhile those who were still there on the 'Trail' especially the walking wounded were told to take the Moresby Road.

At War's end when Battle Honours were being handed out, or should I say bestowed, those units which had been involved in the Owen Stanley Campaign were all awarded Kokoda Trail; except the 39th Battalion who insisted having one word 'Kokoda' as they were the only unit which fought there. There were no objections at that time and none since although these last few years some people are saying that 'Trail' is an American word.

In 1972 the Papua New Guinea Government set up a Place Names Commission, which named the way across the Owen Stanleys 'The Kokoda Trail'. During their investigations they discovered that all the Australian Survey Corps Maps being printed in late 1942-43 names it the 'Kokoda Trail' and that in 1932 the wife of a planter on the Sogeri Plateau had written a book about the mountain trail and she named the book 'The Kokoda Trail'.

Major General Kingsley Norris, the Medical Director of the 7th Division at the time who had traversed it more than anyone else, setting up rest and dressing stations for the wounded, wrote of it, *'Time, rain and the jungle growth will eventually obliterate this native pad; but forever more will live the memory of weary men who have passed this way and ghosts of glorious men who have gone, gone*

far beyond the Kokoda Trail. General Norris' description of the '*native pad*' is worth reading in the pages of 'Retreat from Kokoda' by Raymond Paul, Chapter 6.

(Signed)

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