Is Kokoda an important part of your Australian national identity?

THE KOKODA TRACK

“The Kokoda campaign as part of Australia’s heritage is now a focus of national commemoration and reflection …

The track resonates today as a significantly Australian military achievement because it represents a moment in our history when Australia’s forces were no longer fighting as a junior partner in the British Empire, as happened at Gallipoli and Singapore. Kokoda was a battle fought and won by Australians, on the Australian territory of Papua, and fought in the belief that if Australian forces were defeated, the Australian mainland might be invaded.

The Australian memorials to all participants honour the attributes of the diggers. Loyalty and, above all else, mateship, have come to be closely associated with Australian values.”

Dr Peter Williams, Kokoda For Dummies, Wiley, St Lucia, 2012, page 20

During 2012 the focus of the Defence 2020 program has been to ask students to consider: How has the Australian Defence Force (ADF) helped shape Australian national identity?

The program has looked at ways in which current ADF activities within Australia and overseas through combat, peace keeping and humanitarian activities, have reflected and promoted values and attitudes that students are proud to adopt as part of their own idea of who we are and how we should behave.

The program also looked at that most important event, the origin of the Anzac Spirit at Gallipoli in 1915, and its development during the remainder of the war, especially on the Western Front.

The quotation above places Kokoda as part of Australia’s military-based national identity. The National Curriculum: History requires students to explain the significance of Kokoda as the battle that halted the Japanese advance on Port Moresby and helped foster the Anzac legend’. This unit looks at that significant event — the Kokoda Track, part of the Papuan campaign of 1942 and early 1943. What happened in those battles? Is Kokoda an important part of our sense of national identity in the same way that Gallipoli is? Is this ‘Anzac legend’ still relevant to young people today?

Your tasks

To do this we must inquire — look at evidence to understand the facts of what happened, to separate the myths from the reality, to identify desirable and undesirable qualities, and then make a decision about what aspects of Kokoda, if any, are still relevant to who we are today.

This inquiry involves these three main activities:

**ACTIVITY 1** Understanding the context of the war — Map activity
**ACTIVITY 2** Empathising with the soldiers — Sources activity
**ACTIVITY 3** Reflecting on Kokoda and national identity — Conclusions and discussion

As you work through these activities you will need to complete the summary tables on the next page.
Knowledge and Understanding of Kokoda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What was the war context for Kokoda?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did it occur?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was involved?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why was it fought?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened? (Sequence of events)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was the campaign fought?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was it like for the soldiers?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were the outcomes?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were its impacts?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were its consequences?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important was it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is our judgement about its significance and relevance to our sense of national identity today?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Developing Empathy For The Soldiers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECT</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The environment in which the battles were fought</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of the fighting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supply and equipment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical and wounded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papuan involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living conditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Japanese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualities and behaviour of the Australian soldiers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most Australian troops were fighting in Europe and North Africa. Australia’s only force in Asia, the 8th Division, about 15,000 men, surrendered to the Japanese at the fall of Singapore in February 1942. The Australian mainland was left to be defended by a small Air Force, and a few thousand largely untrained and mostly conscripted Citizen Military Forces (CMF) troops.

Once Japan had seized its new Asian empire the key to keeping it was control of the air. This meant controlling land-based airfields. The only threat to the new Japanese empire was the United States. If Japan could control a ring of airfields it could stop the Americans from building up sufficient forces in Australia to launch a counter-attack against Japanese-held places in the Pacific and Asia.

Some of the airfields that were vital to this war strategy were in Papua — in the Buna area, at Milne Bay, Kokoda and Port Moresby. Japan did not need to control all these, but it did need to control most of them. In July it invaded Papua at Buna, and quickly gained control there. It had hoped to take Port Moresby by a sea-borne invasion, but the failure to defeat an Allied fleet in the Battle of the Coral Sea meant that the Japanese could not provide naval air protection to their troop carriers. Defeat at the Battle of Midway in June further reduced its fleet, and effectively destroyed this amphibious invasion plan. The Japanese could still try to take Milne Bay from the sea with a small invasion force — but could now only take Kokoda and Port Moresby by land, over the Kokoda Track.

The Kokoda Track

The Battle of the Kokoda Track (or Trail, both names are acceptable and accurate) was complex, and took place over many weeks.

The Allies did not believe that the Japanese would try to take Port Moresby overland, so were totally unprepared when the Japanese landed at Gona to start their advance across the Owen Stanley Range to Port Moresby. The 7th Division was sent to reinforce the existing troops, mainly CMF troops, at Port Moresby and along the Kokoda Track.

The campaign developed through four main phases. These were:

- **Stage 1:** A small Australian force of the 39th Battalion and the Papuan Infantry Regiment moved forward from Port Moresby to defend Kokoda against a Japanese invasion force coming along the track from Buna;
- **Stage 2:** The Australians were forced to retreat back along the Kokoda Track towards Port Moresby;
- **Stage 3:** The Australians brought up fresh troops to counter-attack, and force the Japanese back to Kokoda and beyond;
- **Stage 4:** The Australians and fresh American troops now fought to eliminate the Japanese from Papua at Buna, Gona and Sanananda (the ‘Battle of the Beachheads’).

The campaign was also influenced by the defeat of a Japanese landing at Milne Bay, and fighting between the Americans and Japanese at Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands.

1. **February 1942**
   - 30 men of the Papuan Infantry Battalion (PIB) (private soldiers were Papuans, the commander a New Zealander, the officers Australian, and the corporals and sergeants a mixture) are sent from Port Moresby to Kokoda area.

2. **7 July**
   - 100 men of B Company of the 39th Battalion CMF reach Kokoda from the base at Port Moresby. Their aim is to secure Kokoda airstrip, to allow the supply of allied troops in the campaign. Without air re-supply, the troops (both Japanese and Australian) have to carry their own supplies (or seize them along the way from local villages and dead troops), reducing their efficiency as a fighting force.
   - The 39th are poorly equipped for the task. They have insufficient clothing for the wet, freezing nights, and their khaki uniforms stand out in the jungle. They have quinine as protection against malaria, but the main problem is dysentery, a disease that causes severe and continuous diarrhoea and dehydration, for which they have very few medical supplies.

3. **21 July**
   - Japanese forces land at Gona and start their move towards Port Moresby over the Owen Stanley Range.

4. **23 July**
   - First fighting between the Papuan Infantry Battalion (PIB) and the advancing Japanese at Awala, near Kokoda.

5. **28 July – 7 August**
   - First Battle of Kokoda. Kokoda is occupied and lost several times in this period.

6. **7 August**
   - Start of Battle of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, which draws potential Japanese reinforcements away from Papua.

7. **8 – 10 August**
   - The Japanese take hold Kokoda, and force the Australians to start a retreat.

8. **12 – 14 August**
   - Battle at Deniki as the Australians try to hold the advancing Japanese.

9. **26 – 30 August**
   - The Battle at Isurava. The 39th are ordered to hold at all costs. They have lived for weeks without a change of clothing or proper food; their boots are holed and torn; their clothes are constantly wet; they sleep without shelter or blankets; most are weakened by dysentery; ammunition is desperately short. One of the medical officers on the Track later describes them as ‘gaunt spectres with gaping boots and rotting tatters of uniform hanging around them like scarecrows’. Their faces had no expression, their eyes sunk back into their sockets. They were drained by malaria, dysentery and near-starvation.’
   - Reinforcements from the 2/14th Battalion AIF arrived to relieve the weary, battered and bloodied 39th, but there are insufficient men to hold the area —— so the 39th stay on with them. For the first time the volunteer AIF and the conscript CMF fight together.
   - The battle rages for several days. On the fourth day the Japanese are threatening to break through, until Private Bruce Kingsbury’s bravery in charging the enemy, firing a Bren gun from the hip, and clearing the area. Kingsbury is then killed by a sniper’s bullet. He is awarded the Victoria Cross, the first to be awarded on Australian soil (Papua was then a Protectorate of Australia).
   - For the next two weeks the Australians begin a fiercely fought ‘cat and mouse’ withdrawal from Isurava to Eora Creek.

**Note:** Australia had two armies at this stage — the AIF, volunteers who could be sent anywhere in the world, and the CMF or Militia, a mixture of conscripts and volunteers who could only serve in Australian territory. Papua New Guinea was an Australian protectorate so this legally meant that the Militia could be sent there.

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25 August–7 September
Battle of Milne Bay. Japanese underestimate the number of Allied troops there, and fail in an amphibious invasion. This is the first time in the war that the Japanese are defeated in a land battle.

5 September
1,000 fresh Australian troops dig in on a ridge near Efogi. The Japanese, reinforced by 1,500 fresh troops, launch a three-prong attack on the Australians’ front, rear and flank. The Australians hold the site for three valuable days, delaying the advancing Japanese and stretching their supplies.

11–17 September
Australians withdraw to Iorabaiwa, then to Imita Ridge. This is the closest the Japanese come to Port Moresby.

24 September
The 7,500 troops that have been tasked to reinforce the Japanese at Iorabaiwa are instead sent to Guadalcanal, and Japanese General Hori is ordered to withdraw to Gona. The Japanese start their retreat, being harassed by the now-advancing Australians.

16 October–29 October
Australians force the Japanese back through battles at Templeton’s Crossing and Eora Creek.

2 November
Australians re-take Kokoda.

18 December
Australians take Gona.

12 November
Australians take Wairopi. This is the last fighting on the Track. Australians have suffered 807 killed and 1,015 wounded.

12 November
Australians re-take Kokoda.

16 October–29 October
Australians force the Japanese back through battles at Templeton’s Crossing and Eora Creek.

2 November
Australians re-take Kokoda.

18 December
Australians take Gona.

2 January 1943
Australians and Americans take Buna.

23 January 1943
Australians take Sanananda. This is the end of the Papuan Campaign.
We can develop knowledge and understanding of Kokoda from facts and historical accounts. But the best way to try and understand what it was like for the men involved is to look at evidence from the time. Of course, we cannot hope to fully know what it was like to be there, but we can try to gain some understanding through their words, and through images from the time.

6 Look at each of the following evidence sources.
7 Decide which of the aspects on the Empathy table it helps you understand.
8 Add your own summary to the table.

**SOURCE A** A journalist describes the Track

It is full of malaria, ague, dysentery, scrub typhus, obscure diseases; full of crocodiles and snakes and bloated spiders, leeches, lice, mosquitos, flies, all the crawling, creeping, leaping, flying biting reptiles and insects that suck human blood (and in the morning you make a habit of knocking your boots to shake the scorpions out). Its breath is poisonous; it stinks of rotten fungus and dead leaves turning softly liquid underfoot; mould and mildew put their spongy paws over everything, shoes, papers, clothing, sprout with grey beards, and there is a motting of brown measles-spots on the cigarette which sags from your mouth, if you’ve been lucky enough to find a cigarette.

Sometimes it’s so wet that wood won’t burn until it has been dried by the little flame which you keep smouldering almost permanently, like prehistoric man. Sometimes it’s so hot that sweat trickles like brine over the lips. Sometimes it’s so cold that your bones seem to chatter. Sometimes it’s so high that your ears hurt, you can’t hear properly, you have to keep opening and shutting your mouth. At the end of the trail, the Japanese with knives and bullets. But the jungle enlists a thousand enemies before this last enemy of all. It is unending, unrelenting, unforgiving. It is maleficent. It is not made for man…

*Clement Semmler (ed), The War Despatches of Kenneth Slessor, OUP, Melbourne, 1987, page 316*

**SOURCE B** Extracts from the poem WX Unknown*

Just a boy he looked, with his snowy hair,
As we laid him down in the clay;
The padre’s voice was low and clear,
No others had words to say.
Yet we knew a mother would watch and wait,
For a letter sent by her boy,
How she would dream of the things he did,
How his first words caused her joy
And as he went off to school or game,
He’d wave her fond goodbyes.
Just as he did when the great call came,
And the hot tears hurt her eyes.
Perhaps she will know in some unknown way,
Of that little rugged cross,
The remains of her hero beneath it lay,
Where the trees are draped in moss.

Sapper Bert Beros www.kokodatreks.com/history/diggerspoemsstories.cfm

(*WX refers to the first letters of a soldier’s enlistment number — the W tells us that he was from Western Australia, the X that he was in the AIF)*

**SOURCE C** Attitudes to the Japanese

The extreme strain of battle, the loss of friends, the unyielding nature of the Japanese soldier — all contributed to a murderous hatred of the enemy felt among the Australians… [One soldier] recalled: ‘[I] pinned one Jap to the ground with my bayonet and screamed with laughter…’ Later, he reverted to his old, caring self — putting stones around a dying mate to warm him… ‘Holding rosary and crucifix all the time.’

Paul Ham, Kokoda, ABC Books, Sydney, 2010, page 60
**SOURCE D** | Papuan bearers

Every team of bearers was responsible for the patient, and they took pride in their sick patients and gave them every care — protecting them as far as possible from wet, and giving them drinks of water. At night the patient was made as comfortable as possible — if necessary, a shelter was built, the food provided was given to them — they themselves going without. Four natives slept on each side, and if the patient stirred or complained in the night — one native would investigate.

The carrying of the patients was one of the hardest tasks the natives were asked to do — some twelve hours per day — day after day — it took approximately ten days to carry wounded from Deniki to Base.

*Papua Campaigns, Report dealing with medical organisation 1942, AWM 54 481/2/48*  

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**SOURCE E** | A description of the Track

Along the route were skeletons, picked clean by ants and other insects, and in the dark recesses of the forest came to our nostrils the stench of the dead, hastily buried, or perhaps not buried at all.

*Dudley McCarthy, South-West Pacific Area — First Year Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1959*

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**SOURCE F** | A soldier remembers: Jack Manol

Oh my God, that walking! The first half hour I thought, ‘No, I’ll never do this.’ I was exhausted! But I didn’t like to show it, to anyone, particularly to the country blokes, because they were going along all right.

At one stage I remember looking around at my few mates in the section and they’re yellow skinned and a dirty, scruffy lot and I thought: ‘Christ, there’s no-one between us and Moresby, and if the Japs get through us and get to Moresby there, Australia’s gone’.

*4 Corners — The Men Who Saved Australia, ABC TV, 1998*

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**SOURCE G** | Papuan bearers and the wounded

... they never forgot their patients, carrying them as gently as they could, avoiding the jolts and jars of the many ups and downs. The last stretcher was carried out by the RAP [Regimental Aid Post] boys, two volunteers, Padre Fred and myself. Till then we never knew the effort needed, nor fully appreciated the work the carriers were doing. Their bare, splayed feet gave them a better grip than our cleated boots could claim on the slippery rocks and mud.

Some of the bearers disliked the tight, flat canvas surfaces of the regulation army stretchers, off which a man might slide or be tipped. They felt safer with the deeper beds of their own bush made stretchers — two blankets doubled round two long poles cut from the jungle. Each time we watched them hoist the stretchers from the ground to their shoulders for another stint, we saw their strong leg, arm and back muscles rippling under their glossy black skins. Manly and dignified, they felt proud of their responsibility to the wounded, and rarely faltered. When they laid their charges down for the night they sought level ground on which to build a rough shelter of light poles and leaves. With four men each side of a stretcher, they took it in turns to sleep and to watch, giving each wounded man whatever food, drink or comfort there might be.

*H D Steward, Recollections of a Regimental Medical Officer, Melbourne, 1983, pages 112-3*

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**SOURCE H** | Cowardice

Surprisingly few lost their minds. Mental collapse was quite rare ... [there were] only a few cases during the retreat of ‘blokes throwing in the sponge’ ... A few troops were accused of self-inflicted wounds ... [one medical officer claimed that] of small hand and foot wounds [that] did flow into Queensland hospitals in suspiciously large numbers ... between 10 and 25 per cent ... were intentional. There has been no investigation.

*Paul Ham, Kokoda, ABC Books, Sydney, 2010, page 206*
and several Mentions in Dispatches. Winning a Victoria Cross, two Military Crosses, three Military Medals

2/14th Battalion — remain the most highly decorated in military history, inspired his mates to follow: Kingsbury’s section — ten men of the unit’s position. Kingsbury’s saved his battalion headquarters by halting the enemy advance. ‘He stabilised our position; he just made us hold... positions with his fire and inflicting an extremely high number of casualties.

One of few survivors of a Platoon which had been overrun and severely cut about by the enemy, [Kingsbury] immediately volunteered to join a different platoon which had been ordered to counterattack. He rushed forward firing the Bren gun from his hip through terrific machine-gun fire and succeeded in clearing a path through the enemy. Continuing to sweep enemy positions with his fire and inflicting an extremely high number of casualties

Private Kingsbury was then seen to fall to the ground shot dead by the bullet from a sniper hiding in the wood …

He died instantly, aged 24.

VCs are not awarded for blind heroics; the action must tangibly improve the unit’s position. Kingsbury’s saved his battalion headquarters by halting the enemy advance. ‘He stabilised our position; he just made up his mind he was going to do it, and he did it’ … If the Japanese had broken through they would’ve overrun and destroyed the Australians, and no doubt ‘streamed on down to Port Moresby’ … His action inspired his mates to follow: Kingsbury’s section — ten men of the 2/14th Battalion — remain the most highly decorated in military history, winning a Victoria Cross, two Military Crosses, three Military Medals and several Mentions in Dispatches.

Paul Ham, Kokoda, ABC Books, Sydney, 2010, pages 175-7

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Heroics at Isurava (1)
The Australians had neither the numbers nor the ammunition to withstand the onslaught. They were gradually overwhelmed, but not without a string of extraordinary last stands, which yielded more Allied decorations than in any other single battle in the Pacific.

These were not blind heroics; they were calculated initiatives by Australian privates, corporals and platoon commanders determined to hold off the enemy as their units withdrew. Thus Private Wakefeld, a Sydney wool worker, held up a Japanese charge as his section fell back; he won the Military Medal. Thus Captain Maurice Treacy, a shop assistant, ‘parried every thrust levelled at him’. He got a Military Cross. Though wounded in the hand and foot, Corporal ‘Teddy’ Bear, a die-cast operator from Moonee Ponds, killed a reported 15 Japanese with his Bren gun at point blank range; he was later awarded the Military Medal and the DCM. Lieutenant Mason, a draftsman, led his platoon in four counterattacks that afternoon; as did Lieutenant Butch Bissett, a jackaroo, whose platoon fought off fourteen Japanese charges …

At noon that day, the Japanese tried to run straight up the centre … It was an astonishingly audacious move … The steep gradient shows why a few Australians were able to resist them for so long. By the early afternoon, ‘the breakthrough was menacing the whole battalion position’.” A 2/4th HQ detachment rushed up to meet the emergency. Privates Alan Avery and Bruce Kingsbury latched onto this last attack. Kingsbury was an average, outgoing young Australian of apparently modest ambitions. After leaving school, he took various jobs around New South Wales and Victoria — real estate salesman, station hand, farmer — before returning to work for his father’s property business in Melbourne. He enlisted in the AIF on 29 May 1940, and served in Syria and Egypt — then came home with the 7th Division to fight the Japanese. Avery and Kingsbury were childhood friends; they’d enlisted together, and maybe Avery best knew what ran through Kingsbury’s mind at that moment: Calculated courage? Conscious self-sacrifice? Or the thoughts of a young soldier anxious not to be seen to fail? Perhaps all three combined to produce Kingsbury’s next action, as recorded in his citation for the Victoria Cross, the Commonwealth’s highest military honour:

One of few survivors of a Platoon which had been overrun and severely cut about by the enemy, [Kingsbury] immediately volunteered to join a different platoon which had been ordered to counterattack. He rushed forward firing the Bren gun from his hip through terrific machine-gun fire and succeeded in clearing a path through the enemy. Continuing to sweep enemy positions with his fire and inflicting an extremely high number of casualties

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Paul Ham, Kokoda, ABC Books, Sydney, 2010, pages 175-7

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Heroics at Isurava (2)
Through the widening breach poured another flood of the attackers … met with Bren gun and Tommy gun, with bayonet and grenade; but still they came, to close with the buffet of fist and boot and rifle-butt, the steel of crashing helmets and of training, strangling fingers. In this vicious fighting, man-to-man and hand-to-hand, [the Australians] were in imminent peril of annihilation.


Cannibalism
An Australian patrol found Australian bodies at Templeton’s Crossing. They were tied to trees, and pieces of their bodies cut off. Uneaten body parts were found in Japanese packs nearby.

Two Japanese diaries recorded:

‘No provisions. Some men are said to be eating the flesh of Tori [an abbreviation of Toriko, a captive] …’

‘Because of the food shortage, some companies have been eating the flesh of Australian soldiers … We are looking for anything edible now and are eating grass, leaves and the pith of [trees].’

In fact, a few Australian troops also succumbed to the temptation. An Australian patrol, lost and starving for weeks behind enemy lines, cannibalised one of their dead mates …


The Japanese soldier
There were sensitive natures [among the Japanese] but they had a different attitude … They were part of a society where discipline was something so ingrained and their notion of honour as soldiers was such that they found fanaticism.

Victor Austin, quoted in Paul Ham, Kokoda, ABC Books, Sydney, 2010, page 528
**SOURCE M** Retreat from Ioribaiwa

The conditions under which the Australians retreated from Kokoda beggar description. Men were so rotten with dysentery that they walked clad only in their shirts. Small parties, cut off by the Japs, made their way back through the enemy lines at night, slaying little groups of Japanese soldiers as they slept and stealing their food. Men slept in the slash and the rain, and were roused from their sleep to retreat, and fight, and retreat again . . . No prisoners were taken on either side. No quarter was asked and no quarter was given. Men who were wounded were left to die on the side of the trail.

Geoffrey Reading, *Papuan Story*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1946, page 50

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**SOURCE N** A soldier remembers: soldier QX12104

I will never forget my first day in action against the Japanese in New Guinea. My knees were knocking, my heart was pounding, and I was frightened all day, and to make things worse it was raining like hell. One day we were in single file like following the leader, wading in green slush and slime. I was nearly buggered, and when I stepped over the slimy log I sunk right down to my waist in the muddy water, and the so-called log slid around under my groin. When I looked down at it a Jap skull was looking up at me, with no eyes, no nose and a hole where his mouth was. Well my hair stood straight up, and my helmet tipped over my forehead. I grabbed a prickly vine for support, and my stomach coming up to my throat, but I had to keep on walking, or I would have been lost.


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**SOURCE O** A soldier remembers: Lew Scott

Some Australians ran. They ran right through us and I grabbed my pack and rifle and went over the side too.

4 Corners — *The Men Who Saved Australia*, ABC TV, 1998

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**SOURCE P** Extracts from the poem Jungle Patrol by Corporal Peter Coverdale

With senses keen all nerves alert, we move along the track,
With weapons gripped in ready hands, all ready for the trap;
Not a word is spoken as we file along, unbroken the jungle’s gloom.
Tensed for the impact of a shot, from a hidden sniper’s lair.
Ready for the deadly booby traps to take the innocents unaware.
We fan out from the narrow trail, leave some to watch our flank,
And sneak upon those rude grass huts, through jungle green and dank.
We work in pairs from hut to hut, find trace of recent foe.
Black fires still warm, and half cooked rice, on cautious way we go.
A sudden roar as a lone sick Jap, holds grenade against his chest,
And reply with chattering Owen gun, to the sniping rifle’s crack.
He called to me, confidentially: ‘Hey, dig, bend down a minute. Listen . . . I think we are going to be left when they pull out. Will you do us a favour? Scrounge us a tommy gun from somewhere, will you?’
It was not bravado. You could see that by looking in his eyes. He just wanted to see a Jap before he died. That was all. Such things should have been appalling. They were not appalling. One accepted them calmly. They were jungle war – the most merciless war of all.


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**SOURCE Q** A soldier remembers: Jack Manol

I struck this Japanese officer and he rose up from the kurnai [grass] and we were face-to-face with each other and I think he was just as bloody scared as I was, and I was just lucky that I could pull the bloody trigger first. That haunted me for years. When I went through the bloke’s equipment I found he had photographs of himself and his wife and three little kids.

4 Corners — *The Men Who Saved Australia*, ABC TV, 1998

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**SOURCE R** A war correspondent on the nature of combat

The whole battle had become a blind groping in a tangle of growth . . . It was seldom that anyone got a glimpse of the enemy. Most of the wounded were very indignant about it. I must have heard the remark ‘You can’t see the little bastards!’ hundreds of times in the course of a day. Some of the men said it with tears in their eyes and clenched fists. They were humiliated beyond endurance by the fact that they had been put out of action before even seeing a Japanese.

At Eora I saw a 20-year-old redheaded boy with shrapnel in his stomach. He kept muttering to himself about not being able to see the blasted Japs. When Eora was to be evacuated, he knew he had very little chance of being shifted back up the line. He called to me, confidentially: ‘Hey, dig, bend down a minute. Listen . . . I think us blokes are going to be left when they pull out. Will you do us a favour? Scrounge us a tommy gun from somewhere, will you?’

It was not bravado. You could see that by looking in his eyes. He just wanted to see a Jap before he died. That was all. Such things should have been appalling. They were not appalling. One accepted them calmly. They were jungle war – the most merciless war of all.


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Angels’ writes a letter home about the ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy
handling them as gently as a mother her child.
I've seen them carrying, on stretchers, wounded men back to base and
hours at a stretch over rough, slippery mountain tracks.
carrying loads, which would make the average white man stagger, for
I've seen these small, wiry, brown men. With their perpetual grins,
have done so well up here.
Without his loyalty, courage, and endurance I'm sure we could never
pay in something more than words.
There is a tribute I, and I'm sure every soldier up here, would like to
Source u
The conditions under which the Australians retreated from Kokoda
beggar description. Men were so rotten with dysentery that they
walked clad only in their shirts … Men slept in the slush and the rain,
and were roused from their sleep to retreat, and fight, and retreat
again… No prisoners were taken by either side … [Japanese] who
were wounded were left to die by the side of the trail … The creeks
were poisoned with decaying bodies and dysentery.
Source X
The poor bloke died that night. And although I'm ashamed to say it, in
my heart and although no-one said it, we weren't sorry.
4 Corners — The Men Who Saved Australia, ABC TV, 1998

A soldier remembers: Victor Austin
After a few bursts of fire the order came to fix bayonets, and it was
then, for the first time, I became really frightened. The clash in the
village was short and sharp with a few killed and wounded on both
sides. One Jap was lying beside the track with both legs chopped from
the trunk of his body, and where his legs should have joined the trunk
there was just a mass of blood – he had been cut in half by a burst of .45 ‘Tommy’ gun fire! His eyes were still open and had a terrified
expression and he was moaning.
And then came the beginning of some of the terrible things that
happen in combat. Our officer didn’t have the stomach to finish off the
dying ‘Nip’ – instead he detailed me to do it, and I have lived to this
day with those terrified eyes staring at me.
Victor Austin, To Kokoda and Beyond, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne,
1988, page 125

A soldier remembers: Soldier VX66349
Once a patrol of ours found one of our mates, who had been missing.
He’d been tied to a tree by the Japs, with a length of bamboo forced
into his backside. He was still alive, but died soon after. I went a little
insane for a while and when we cornered some Japs later on the
things we did to them now seem horrifying — but I guess that’s war
(VX66349).
John Barrett, We Were There, Viking, Melbourne, 1987, page 439

Gunner Wheatley, in New Guinea,
writes a letter home about the ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy
Angels’
There is a tribute I, and I’m sure every soldier up here, would like to
pay in something more than words.
It is to the native. We call him a ‘Boong’ and honor him like a brother.
Without his loyalty, courage, and endurance I’m sure we could never
have done so well up here.
I’ve seen these small, wiry, brown men. With their perpetual grins,
carrying loads, which would make the average white man stagger, for
hours at a stretch over rough, slippery mountain tracks.
I’ve seen them carrying, on stretchers, wounded men back to base and
handling them as gently as a mother her child.
Australian Women’s Weekly, 8 January 1943

A soldier remembers: Jack Sim
We were carrying a badly wounded mate on a stretcher and we were
struggling along, see there were only seven of us and that affected the
rotation, four and four.
That night we slept on the track somewhere in the jungle and I could
see something glistening in the moonlight. And it was a tin of IXL
blackberry jam. So we opened it up with our bayonets and scooped it
out in handfuls and ate it with a biscuit. The most beautiful stuff I ever
tasted in my life.
The poor bloke died that night. And although I’m ashamed to say it, in
my heart and although no-one said it, we weren’t sorry.
4 Corners — The Men Who Saved Australia, ABC TV, 1998

Extracts from Japanese soldiers’
diaries and notebooks
- I am tired of NEW GUINEA, I think only of home, I wish I could eat
a belly-full. I have hardly eaten for 50 days, I am bony and skinny, I
walk with faltering steps, I want to see my children.
- Whenever and wherever I die, I will not regret it because I have
already given my soul and body to my country and I have said
farewell to my parents, wife, brother and sister.
- To the enemy officer: I am sorry to trouble you, but I beg you to
bury my body, placing the head towards the north west. I fought
bravely till the last. The situation was unfavourable to us. My end
has come.
A Study of the Japanese Soldier

A wartime observer
The conditions under which the Australians retreated from Kokoda
beggar description. Men were so rotten with dysentery that they
walked clad only in their shirts … Men slept in the slush and the rain,
and were roused from their sleep to retreat, and fight, and retreat
again… No prisoners were taken by either side … [Japanese] who
were wounded were left to die by the side of the trail … The creeks
were poisoned with decaying bodies and dysentery.
G. Reading, Papuan Story, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1946, page 104

A soldier remembers: Mick Considine
Most times you couldn’t use your tent, you sat in a hole in the ground
and tried to sleep with dysentery that they
walked clad only in their shirts … Men slept in the slush and the rain,
and were roused from their sleep to retreat, and fight, and retreat
again… No prisoners were taken by either side … [Japanese] who
were wounded were left to die by the side of the trail … The creeks
were poisoned with decaying bodies and dysentery.
(Source Z)

http://home.vicnet.net.au/~a23mbf/t_hist/mg_hist.htm

In battle
[The 3rd Battalion] had first to dispose of a machine gun and [Sergeant
Bede] Tongs did it. He crawled up to a fire lane, under fire, and tossed
a grenade which lobbed right in the pit. The two Japs in the pit were
destroyed. Then came the beginning of some of the terrible things that
happened in combat. Our officer didn’t have the stomach to finish off the
dying ‘Nip’ – instead he detailed me to do it, and I have lived to this
day with those terrified eyes staring at me.
Dudley McCarthy, South-West Pacific Area - First Year Australian War Memorial,
Canberra, 1959, page 273
Additional information

Here is some additional information about Kokoda and the Papuan campaign that will help you develop your knowledge and understanding of the campaign, and your empathy for the men involved in it.

9  Add any information and ideas to your Knowledge and Understanding and Empathy tables.

**SOURCE A** The outcome of Kokoda

- The Battles of Kokoda, Milne Bay and Buna-Gona together make up the Papuan campaign, which was a strategic victory for the Australians and Americans. Port Moresby was secure so Japan couldn’t invade Australia’s east coast — because the Japanese needed a port and airfield complex near to Australia as a base from which to launch an invasion. The only large port and airfield close to north Queensland, which is where the Japanese would’ve landed, was Port Moresby.

But more than preventing the possible invasion of Australia had been achieved. Japanese plans had been thrown into disarray and a wide avenue of advance to the north had opened up with the fall of Buna. As the fighting in Papua commenced in July 1942, the Japanese were expecting an Allied counteroffensive and had decided on a line of defensive positions they wanted to hold, including Port Moresby and Milne Bay, with Buna as the base supporting both. On that line, they expected to defeat the counteroffensive. The Japanese failed to take either Port Moresby or Milne Bay and by January 1943 they had lost Buna too. Now Bona became the base for the Allied advance north towards Rabaul.


**SOURCE B** Some myths about Kokoda

The leading historian of Kokoda, Dr Peter Williams, says there are many popular myths about Kokoda. Here are some that he identifies in his books *Kokoda for Dummies* (Wiley, Richmond, 2012) and *The Kokoda Campaign 1942* (Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2012):

- **MYTH:** The Japanese greatly outnumbered the Australians.
- **REALITY:** This was commonly believed by the Australians (and the Japanese believed the Australians outnumbered them). Dr Williams says that:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Australians</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Kokoda 28-29 July</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Kokoda 8-10 August</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deniki 12-14 August</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isurava 26-30 Aug</td>
<td>2300</td>
<td>2300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eora 2 Sept</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efoqi 6-9 Sept</td>
<td>1550</td>
<td>1570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ioribaiwa 10-28 Sept</td>
<td>2900</td>
<td>1700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oivi-Gorari 5-12 Nov</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Allies weren’t always greatly superior in the numbers engaged in any given battle, rather, they could withdraw tired, exhausted and sick formations, and replace them with fresh ones much more often than could the Japanese.

On the Kokoda Trail from July to September, during the Japanese advance, the Australians generally fought the Japanese at about one to one. It wasn’t until fresh Australian troops began the advance back along the track that Australian numbers began to make themselves felt. Meanwhile, the Australians who had fought in the July to September phase rested in Port Moresby and returned to the fight at Buna-Gona in November.

At Buna-Gona, where the Allies failed at first because their 10 000 men were no match for a similar number of heavily entrenched defenders. With the arrival of Allied reinforcements, particularly the US 32nd Division, and dozens of field guns and tanks that the Japanese couldn’t match, the battle turned in the Allies’ favour.

The Japanese also committed the bulk of their air force and their navy to Guadalcanal. Had these forces been available for operations in Papua, imagining the outcome of the campaign would’ve been as fortuitous for the Allies is difficult.

**MYTH:** Japanese made mass banzai charges, resulting in huge casualties.

**REALITY:** Rarely done as a tactic along the Track, and only a few times by small groups.

**MYTH:** The fighting retreat along the Kokoda Track saved Port Moresby from the Japanese.

**REALITY:** The fighting delayed the Japanese advance, but the key factor was fighting at Guadalcanal in August. The Japanese were unable to send the planned reinforcement troops to help attack Port Moresby, so the Japanese were ordered to retreat.

**MYTH:** It would have been better to let Japanese troops at Buna, Gona and Sanananda starve than to have attacked them. (The greatest casualties were in these three battles.)

**REALITY:** If Japan had continued to control this area it was possible that they might have been able to use it to launch attacks again if they were reinforced.

**MYTH:** The Papuans fought willingly.

**REALITY:** Most were conscripts. Some chose to fight for the Japanese — at least until they saw who was winning.

**MYTH:** The 39th Militia Battalion were mainly 18-year-old conscripts.

**REALITY:** A study of the graves of 39th Battalion members at Bomana War Cemetery, Port Moresby, shows the ages of the dead:

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```


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Tactics, as the average soldier saw it on the track, revolved around platoons (30 to 40 troops) and sections (12 troops) fighting to achieve their objective in isolation from the other platoons and sections, which they couldn’t see.

Everything about jungle fighting is slow (much slower than fighting in open, flat country); even just getting to the battlefield or, if you’re defeated, getting away from it, is slow.

A force on a mountain track must move in single file, allowing about four metres per person. After Isurava, the Japanese had 4,000 men in the mountains. This force would’ve stretched over 16 kilometres of track if they were all moving in one group. This was more than the average day’s march on the track, so those leaving camp first would’ve reached their destination before those at the tail of the column had left the previous night’s camp.

Off the track, or off any of the network of tracks in the Owen Stanley Range, movement slowed again. At loribaiwa, the Australian 2/33rd Battalion, with five days rations, was tasked to march through the jungle around the Japanese flank to Nauro, a distance of 10 kilometres. After a day, the battalion commander reported that progress was so slow he would run out of rations before he got there. The move was cancelled.

Things slowed when the enemy were near. On the track, the lead scout, knowing that at any moment a hidden enemy might open fire on him, would proceed with the utmost caution, perhaps just a few hundred metres each hour if he wanted to stay alive.

The main tactic, used by the attacker in all battles along the track, was to keep the defender holding the track busy with a frontal attack, while another force slipped through the jungle on one or both flanks and tried to block the track in the enemy rear. The defender, who was now cut off from supply and communication, felt isolated, often forcing him to retreat. He could only retreat by cutting a new track through the jungle to one side to reach a point on the main track beyond the foremost enemy.

Peter Williams, Kokoda for Dummies, Wiley, Richmond, 2012, pages 128-9

10 Here is the memorial to the Australians on the Kokoda Track. It is at Isurava. The memorial comprises four black obelisks, set as corners of a square. Each has a particular quality listed. What do you think would be four most appropriate qualities to list on the memorial stones?

13 Are they qualities that are relevant to you as part of your national identity today? Explain your views.

14 You have also discovered some aspects of the Australians’ behaviour that are disturbing to us today. Why do you think such behaviour occurred?

15 Should we reject Kokoda as part of our national identity because of these? Or can we accept the positive and embrace it, while acknowledging the reality of the bad aspects and putting them aside? Explain your views.

16 Look back at the requirements of the National Curriculum: History set out on page 3. How would you now respond to the aspects listed?

Finding out more

Recommended references are:
Paul Ham, Kokoda, ABC Books, Sydney, 2010
Peter Williams, Kokoda for Dummies, Wiley, Richmond, 2012
Bill James, Field Guide to the Kokoda Track, Kokoda Press, Lane Cove, 2008

Film and documentaries
Feature film Kokoda (director Alister Grierson) 0

Websites
www.kokodatreks.com/history/thekokodacampaign.cfm