



The Spirit of Kokoda Then and Now

Patrick Lindsay

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy

Lindsay has linked his own fascinating personal odyssey to the physical, historic and spiritual reality of the Kokoda Track. In response to deep personal trauma, Lindsay walked and harnessed the spirit of the Track.

A highly professional body now organises walks for small groups of Australians who seek to take up their quest on the Track. The participants all find that the physical demands are almost beyond human abilities; however, more important is the impact of the historic and spiritual experience. It is simply not enough to be strong enough for the heat, wet, cold, rain, mud, slush, insects, mountain climbs and ascents, the precarious cliff faces and the steam room humidity of the jungle. Survival demands a mental ability to walk the Track—‘putting one foot ahead of the other’. Lindsay provides a brief, but excellently balanced, overview of the lead up to World War II and the campaign in Papua and New Guinea. He sets the stage with absolute clarity, pointing out the ‘near treason’ of Australia’s interwar neglect of defence spending. The country, which raised an army of over 300,000 and gave two of three to death or wounds in WWI, was now faced with attack from a hitherto victorious nation, which had captured most of the region in a matter of months.

Australia sent a brigade of Militia troops to block the supposed ‘gap’ on the Kokoda Track, which would prevent seasoned Japanese forces, some six times their number, from capturing Port Moresby. The view of the Owen Stanley Ranges from the map tables in Australia was as distorted as seeing a desert filled with oases. The only possible way to understand the nature of this battlefield was to be there, and the information from the men who were there was unwelcome and misunderstood by their commanders in the safety of MacArthur’s headquarters, almost three thousand miles away.

The book spells out in relentless detail the day to day nature of the battle for the Track. The reader comes close to the men in this awful campaign. The cloying nature of the environment, the cunning and skill of the Japanese, the constant tension of fighting an enemy mostly unseen, the wait for the crack of a sniper’s shot, the whack of a mate hit, the narcotic sleep of exhaustion broken by the scream of an enemy charge, all these experiences and more are recreated in the mind and emotions of the reader.

The author has given us a carefully crafted account of the nasty, brutish and sudden battles along the trail. He focuses on the key four-day battle for Isurava, which was a turning point in the Japanese advance. The Japanese were close to overrunning the battalion blocking the Track when a number of Australians charged the advancing Japanese, killing numbers of them and demoralising the remainder by their courage. One key soldier, Bruce Kingsbury charged the enemy firing his Bren gun, although he turned the attack, in the last moment he was shot by a sniper. He was awarded a Victoria Cross. The courage of other members of the force was recognised with medals, however, all members of the force gave their utmost in the battle.

Lindsay covers the rest of the campaign and the eventual victory over the Japanese, of whom only one in ten survived the attempt to capture the Track and Port Moresby. The first time the Japanese had been defeated and driven back in the Pacific theatre was achieved by those MacArthur had described as ineffective.

This is a most readable and instructive book, which provides a wealth of pictures, many in colour, good maps and climbing diagrams, a brief but useful bibliography and index, and there are numerous short comments from many contributors, which added personal depth to their view of the track. The author stresses the relationship, between Gallipoli and the Kokoda Track, as being fundamental aspects of Australia’s military and national heritage. If Gallipoli was the birth of a federated nation, then Kokoda was the first major victory as a nation defending our own territory. These are essential and correct symbols of Australian’s military history, demonstrated in resolution, determination, skill, mateship, courage and sacrifice in the face of overwhelming odds from a fierce environment and enemy.

This book is a profoundly evocative story, which will hit the hearts and minds of all those who have been to the Bomana war cemetery or who have had any experience of the Track. The Track’s power is undiminished and attracts more and more young Australians, because it has so many of the crucial elements of what it is that makes one truly an Australian. ♦

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