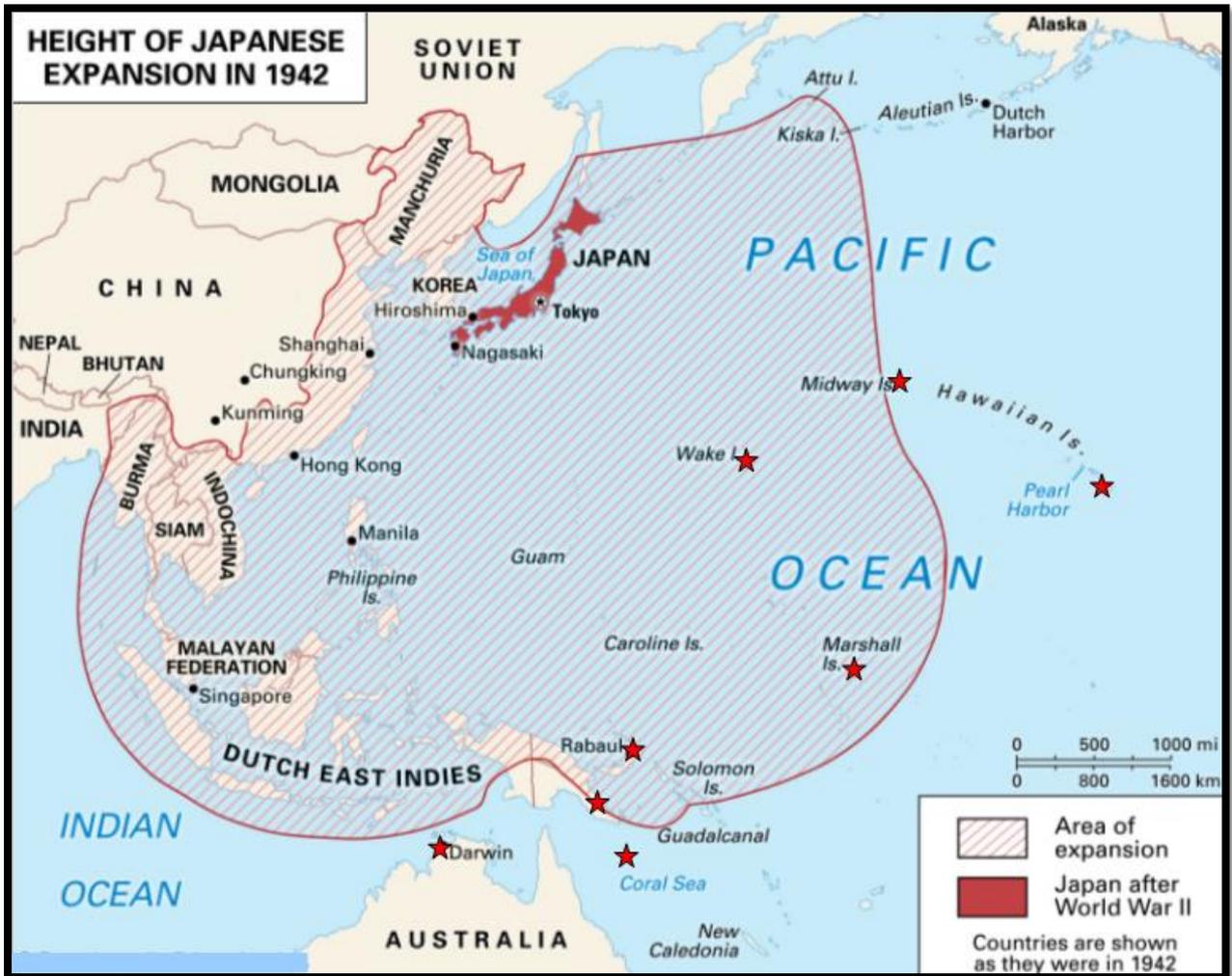


The Battle for Australia

39th Australian Infantry Battalion's War on the Kokoda Track



39th Australian Infantry Battalion Association Education Committee:

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THE 39TH BATTALION'S WAR ON THE KOKODA TRACK

TO THE TEACHER:

War is an unfortunate key area in the History/Social Studies curriculum. It is unavoidable for so much of our understanding of current society, let alone the insights into our humanity, that it must take a fundamental role in our curriculum. We teach the causes of war, the basic events of war and the effects of war. Often, we do not explore the impact of war on the life of the soldier. This series of insights from the point of view of the 39th Battalion's war on the Kokoda track does attempt to give the soldiers' perspective. The war on the Kokoda track is an iconic Australian story, and the battle of Isurava is often cited as one of the key battles in Australia's history, if not for our country's very survival. In telling the story of the 39th, there is a specific window into such matters but it must never be assumed that the 39th Battalion was the only, or the major, force in that war. From their relief at Isurava to the catastrophic final battles at Gona and Buna, while the 39th played their significant role, many divisions of the AIF and American co-combatants played a role in a difficult and tragic warfare where many suffered deeply and even paid the supreme sacrifice. The story of the 39th Battalion is but one window into a history that was written by countless Australians and allied forces as they struggled for the defence of Australia, in the Second World War, 1939 -1945.

The material is divided into subsections, each of a separate aspect of the Kokoda engagement. The first is text, which should be read, aloud or silently, and this is followed by illustrative material, which supplements the text. The last section invites classroom discussion or individual meditation asking students to empathise with the troops and to share their insights with other members of the class.

The work is provided free of charge by the 39th Battalion Association, who bear the responsibility of sharing the story of the Battalion's engagement on the Kokoda track. The young soldiers' work did not finish there and further study would reveal equally significant work on the battle of the northern beaches, which finally drove the enemy away from New Guinea. New Guinea was a colony of Australia in Papua, and a Trust Territory in the north, thus the responsibility for its defence, and of Australia's defence, fell to Australia. Thus, this

exercise is at the heart of Australia's involvement in that cataclysm, and we hope it will lead to wider studies, as the curriculum will allow.

To assist us in amending or adding to this project, please send your suggestions to the email below.

We do ask that when it is used or sent onwards, acknowledgement be made through a message to the Association whose details are as follows: secretary@39battalion.com

Glossary

Brigade (Bde) - 1,000 troops – Colonel

Battalion (Bn) - 300 – 1,000 troops Lieutenant Colonel

Company (Coy) - 80 – 250 troops – Captain

Lieutenant (LT)

Platoon - 15 – 45 troops – Lieutenant

AIF - Australian Imperial Force

Dixie – portable iron pot for boiling food.

Infantry (inf) - foot soldiers

Militia - a body of citizen soldiers as distinguished from professional soldiers.

Munitions – military equipment, ammunition and stores

Nankai Shiti - The Japanese military force on the Kokoda Track

Tactician – skillful ability to gain military advantage

WW2 – World War 2

WW1 – World War 1

A further source is from the Department of Veterans Affairs, “*Kokoda, Exploring the Second World War campaign in Papua New Guinea*” with lessons and source material suitable for Secondary students.

Subsection 1

The 39th Battalion on the Kokoda Track

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Australian troops were engaged in the European theatre and Japan had occupied parts of China. War in the Pacific did not occur until December 1941. On Sunday 7th December 1941 the Japanese military, without declaration of war, bombed the American navy at Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, and inflicted great damage. Hong Kong fell on 13 December, and the Philippines and Malaya fell shortly after. Rabaul was bombed 4th January 1942. Singapore fell on 15th February after heavy bombing, and as Singapore was regarded as invincible, it was clear that no force could stop the Japanese advance. Australia was severely threatened. Then Darwin was bombed on 19th February. Port Moresby became a place of last resort before the anticipated attack on Australia and it was to this small town in Southern Papua that the 39th Battalion, along with other divisions, were sent to offer what little protection seemed available. After the Battle of the Coral Sea, where American and Australian planes created a stalemate in the Japanese advance, the enemy planned to take Port Moresby by a land route, which was the roughhewn native track called the Kokoda Track. They landed at what is known as the northern beaches of Gona and Buna on 22 July 1942.

Subsection 2.

Enlistment and Training

The men of the 39th were volunteers, mostly young men around 18 years of age from the Kew and Hawthorn areas in Melbourne. Some had been in the Militia for up to two months while some were older members of the Militia who had served in WW1. As a Battalion, they had much less training than soldiers of the AIF, and not being professionally trained were sometimes disparaged as 'chocos' implying that, under duress, like chocolate they would melt in the sun. Their brief but inadequate training was in Darley near Bacchus Marsh.

One member, LT Noel Hall wrote:

The training phase of the Bn. commenced firstly with the issue of a tropical kit, (shorts, shirt and short puttees). This dress at Darley, in October, on occasion left much to be desired when a serge uniform and great coat would have been much more appropriate. The Bn. received a full complement of vehicles and carriers and commenced training as a motor regiment! This training culminated in participation in the noteworthy battle of Corangamite staged between troops of the Central Command and A.I.F. Troops undergoing training in Victoria.



It resulted in damage to a great number of vehicles and was the reason for subsequently fitting the big spring crash bar on the front of the then army trucks. Following pre-embarkation leave and a recruiting march through Melbourne the Battalion settled down again.



1941 Battalion's parade through the City of Melbourne

P19. *Mud over Blood Revisited* . Carl Johnson, 2012

No leave was granted over Christmas 1941 as the Unit was on stand-by, but, as usual the base leave was taken and on visiting the Platoon hut about 11 p.m. on Christmas night I found my complement to consist of 4 other ranks, one Christmas cake and 6 bottles of beer. All the other Platoon commanders seemed to fare even worse, however shortly after midnight we again had a full complement

For consideration

Scouts play wide games, cadets have camps, sports teams have away trips and there are other adventure exercises offered today. Could war ever be considered as “an adventure”?

Brief comments by veterans on their ENLISTMENT AND TRAINING

- John Dawes – enlisting at 16 ½ years old (00.40 – 02.51)
- Don Daniels – enlists at 17 years old (02.52 – 03.40)
- Cec Driscoll talks about joining the 39th Battalion (03.40 – 04.33)
- George Cops – remembers the early days (04.34 – 05.50)

Link: <https://youtu.be/k1Xz0rwT2V0>

Subsection 3.

Embarkation

Troops were farewelled but it could take several minutes for an embarkation train to leave Spencer St. Station, as on departure, soldiers would sometimes pull the communication cord to stop the train. One last kiss to family or girlfriend and repeat the action. Arrival in Sydney saw the immediate embarkation to war.



39th Battalion Troops arriving at Woolloomooloo, Sydney.

P. 20 *Mud over Blood Revisited* . Carl Johnson, 2012

Leaving Sydney 27 December 1941 on the Aquitania, the recruits did not know where they were headed. Many had volunteered for tropical service and had imagined Hawaii or similar locations, many thought Darwin, a few imagined Port Moresby, administrative centre of the Australian colony of Papua. To further keep them guessing, the boat frequently changed course in order to avoid submarine threats. They arrived on 3 January 1942.



Aquitania in Port Moresby harbour, 3 January 1942

The Aquitania, when loaded, pulled away from the wharf and waited in the roads. The troops gathered on the quarter deck to get a last view of Sydney and just before dawn we commenced to move out of the harbour, the troops singing “the Maori Farewell,” tug boats pulling their whistles...We picked up two mine sweepers at the Heads and two cruisers for escort.

“There was throughout the voyage, some trouble with the British tramp steamer unable to maintain sufficient speed to keep up with the convoy. This resulted in numerous rude signals. So, amongst the ship’s officers there was a degree of apprehension as the convoy was endeavouring to pass a Japanese task force at that time moving into the area. All guns were ordered at the ready, shells being clipped to the artillery ready racks, all automatic weapons half loaded. Nurses were offloaded onto a NZ frigate and were not taken to New Guinea. (Noel Hall)

For Consideration:

In days before regular air traffic, overseas trips were made by steamer. Would sailing with the enemy in hostile waters create a sense of excitement or of apprehension? Could “going on a great adventure” be a cover for apprehension?

Brief comments by veterans on their EMBARKATION

- Don Daniels – told to take tennis racquets (00.04 – 00.32)
- George Cops – arriving in Port Moresby (00.33 – 01.57)

Link: https://youtu.be/7nfV0T4i_aU

Subsection 4.

First Action

Within a month of arrival in Port Moresby on 23 January, Rabaul, in Northern New Guinea, was attacked and occupied by the enemy. The Australian garrison broke up, some escaped, many were killed, and some suffered atrocities. Australian authorities made it clear that there would be no assistance given. Those in Port Moresby knew that they too would be bombed. This happened at 3.00 a.m., 3 February 1942, with a heavier attack on 5 February followed then by continuing raids. It took until 21 March for air power to counter the raids with the arrival of the 75 Kittyhawk squadron, but even so there was little defensive power at Port Moresby. The great fear was that after the defeat at Rabaul, Port Moresby would be next. The Japanese plan was to attack Port Moresby by sea at the same time as attacking the Solomon Islands but the ensuing Battle of the Coral Sea thwarted this plan by American and Australian naval engagement. It gave time for the new commander in Port Moresby, Brigadier Porter, to train and to ready the troops now stationed there.

LT Noel Hall's recollection as he recounted the 39th's early engagements is as follows:

We were told that we could anticipate fighter aircraft coming in from the southeast at 0800 on the following morning – not to fire on them, as they would be our fighter support. The following morning at 0800 nine aircraft flying at an easy speed with wheels down came in from the Southeast, everybody was waving their mess tins and cheering these aircraft but when they were over the position they folded up their wheels and banked into the sun. As they banked we saw the red rising sun on the wings. They quite successfully strafed the area.

The following morning, without warning, at the same time and from the same direction, nine fighter aircraft approached at high speed with their wheels up. They were in fighter formation. I ordered all guns to commence firing.

One of these aircraft had obviously been shot in the hydraulic line and the wheel came down, another one was smoking, the third one made a very rough landing onto the aerodrome and through my glasses I saw the small blue and red rectangle on the rudder. I ordered all guns to cease firing.

These were obviously the Kittyhawks that should have arrived the previous day.



Capt Eager gets a haircut from Sgt Fred Greenway for tropical comfort.
P.34 *Mud over Blood Revisited* Carl Johnson, 2012

For Consideration:

If you knew that you expected to be bombed early in the morning, and that your protection was a small trench that you dug yourself, what would you hope for to change such a desperate situation?

Brief comments by veterans on their FIRST ACTION

- Cec Driscoll – thoughts on being in action for the first time (00.04.- 00.52)
- John Dawes – remembers his first action (00.53 – 02.15)
- Peter Holloway’s feelings of his first encounter (02.16 – 04.04)

Link: <https://youtu.be/QkvGL1DJPeI>

Subsection 5

The Kokoda Track

After the Battle of the Coral Sea, the enemy switched tactics to an overland attack using the Kokoda Track. Not only would this give land access to Port Moresby, but there was also the prize of gaining control of the Kokoda airstrip. However, neither side understood the difficulties of the Kokoda Track. Colonel Kingsley Norris, A.D.S.M. Of the 7th Division described it thus:

Imagine an area of approximately one hundred miles long. Crumple and fold this into a series of ridges, each rising higher and higher until seven thousand feet is reached, then declining in ridges to three thousand feet. Cover this thickly with jungle, short trees and tall trees, tangled with great, entwining savage vines. Through an oppression of this density, cut a little native track, two or three feet wide, up the ridges, over the spurs, round gorges and down across swiftly flowing, happy mountain streams. Where the track climbs up the mountain side, cut steps - big steps, little steps, steep steps – or clear the soils from the tree roots.

Every few miles, bring the track through a small patch of sunlit kunai grass, or an old deserted native garden, and every seven or ten miles, build a group of dilapidated grass huts- as staging shelters-generally set in a foul, offensive clearing. Every now and then, leave beside the track dumps of discarded, putrefying food, occasional dead bodies and human foulings. In the morning, flicker the sunlight through the tall trees, flutter green and blue and purple and white butterflies lazily through the air, and hide birds of deep-throated song, or harsh cockatoos in the foliage.

About midday and through the night, pour water over the forest, so that the steps become broken, and a continual yellow stream flows downwards, and the few level areas become pools and puddles of putrid black mud. In the high ridges above Myola, drip this water day and night over the track through a foetid forest grotesque with moss and glowing phosphorescent fungi. Such is the track which a prominent politician publicly described as “being almost

impassable for motor vehicles” and such is the route for ten days to be covered from Iola to Deniki.¹

For consideration:

If the Track is so difficult, why do you think so many Australians wish, or actually walk, this difficult journey?

¹Raymond Paull, *Retreat From Kokoda*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1958, p.34f.

Subsection 6

Walking the Track

The track offers a bush walk of incredible beauty, with at times vistas of unending mountain chains to the smaller joys of waterfalls and flowing creeks. At night the fireflies enliven the deep quiet jungle blackness. At dawn the sun reveals vegetation of every shade of green. The challenge of steep climbs, with a false summit suggests that the climb is over, only to be met by more steep inclines. At times there are native gardens, and the emergence into the sunshine as jungle gives way to Kunai grass, at times higher than the walkers below. Trees of enormous height provide shade and ferns and epiphytes adorn the trunks, with vines and undergrowth always close to the usually muddy track. The walk is a challenge with the steep climbs and precarious log bridges over fast flowing streams, but it is a challenge that is not too difficult for most people of reasonable fitness and who can time their walk with rest breaks as they choose.

But the pressure of war did not allow for a pleasant but challenging bushwalk. Fatigue was not alleviated by rest, for the men had to trudge through the limits of tiredness to find the will to keep going. Supplies were limited and bully beef and biscuits were often as much as could be hoped for. On top of personal needs of clothing, food and bedding were added ammunition and rifle, and personal care items were abandoned in expectation of hard work ahead.

Paul Ham described the vegetation at the highest summit

Gathered there are the freaks of nature, alien triffid- like flora: great figs, startling ferns and giant pandanus palms, whose colossal roots hang at eye level as though ripped out of the earth by a giant's hand. Fronds as long as ten feet fall from the canopy, channelling the rain to the forest floor. The long sharp leaves of the cycads, a pre-historic remnant, explode in perfect radial symmetry. On the forest floor vines and shrubbery seem to have coagulated in a frozen state of serpentine violence. Bright green moss sheaves the lower tree trunks, and phosphorescent slime clings to their buttresses, where fans of cream fungi grow.²

²Paul Ham, *Kokoda*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2004, p.150.



Modern day trekkers on the Kokoda Track

Photos used with permission, Ross Darrigan 39th Bn Assoc. member

For Consideration.

Consider the pictures taken from school and other tourists while walking over the track. Where would you find the inner reserves to go forward over ridge after ridge when you felt too tired to move another metre? When waiting to cross over the fast flowing stream on the log bridge, how confident would you feel about the task ahead? What inner qualities would you have shared with the young men also faced with these situations in 1942?

Brief comments by veterans on WALKING THE TRACK

- George Cops – the beauty and otherwise of the track (00.05 – 04.16).
- Joe Dawson - walking the track (04.16 – 06.07)
- Cec Driscoll – “it was tough” (06.08 – 07.30)
- John Dawes – recalls walking the Kokoda Track (07.03 – 08.59)
- George Cops – difficulties of walking the track (09.00 – 09.57)

Link: <https://youtu.be/MUPNezDp-G0>

Subsection 7

Preparing the Track for War

After the Japanese setback due to the Battle of the Coral Sea, allied intelligence learned of plans to attack Port Moresby by an overland route. This could only be along the Kokoda Track. Military headquarters in Australia commissioned a local, Bert Keinzle, a gold miner and rubber plantation manager in the Yodda Valley near Kokoda, to build a road over the Owen Stanley Ranges to be ready by 26 August 1942. Keinzle's response was "I have heard of Superman but I have yet to see him in action!" It was in reality a total impossibility and remains so to this day.

Captain Kelly of the 39th commissioned Captain Sam Templeton to establish an airbase at Dobodura near the northern beaches landing grounds, and Keinzle was to guide Templeton and B Company over the Track. They left 8 July, and Keinzle arranged for 140 native carriers to bring up the equipment for the task, to build rest houses and create deposits of supplies at regular staging posts.

It was tough going. Robyn Keinzle, in her history of Bert's work, described the task to enable troops to access to the track:

They had to clear all the way straight up the face of Mt. Bellamy until they reached the highest point of the track at over 2,1000 meters... From here the terrain became a little more undulating and the vegetation was more open and alpine. Although much of the ground was still covered in moss, it was interspersed with thickets of bamboo. Drinking water was a worry here too on this high ground, with few sources from which to replenish canteens. When it rained there was plenty of water with "the stuff that arrives by the bucket load with seemingly no air gaps at all amongst the sheets of water."³

On arrival at Kokoda, not yet occupied by the Japanese, Keinzle organised another group of carriers in preparation for the anticipated campaign along the Track. Much is owed to this man and to the incalculable work of the native team. He left 17 July 1942 on his return trip to Port

³Robyn Keinzle *The Architect of Kokoda*, Hachette, Sydney 2011, p.119.

Moresby, and then walked the Kokoda Track eight times in four months leading, encouraging and gauging how much his team of carriers could bear and helping them maintain rest houses and food supplies for the 39th troops which were soon to be sent over the track. There were never enough supplies at any stage of the campaign



The

Kokoda Track.



Photo by Ron Halsall, 39th Bn. veteran

For Consideration:

Often in any given situation, local knowledge can differ from official knowledge. How is it best to enable and reconcile local and official understandings of any given situation?

Brief comments by veteran on PREPARING THE TRACK FOR WAR

- Cec Driscoll remembers Bert Kienzle (00.05-04.16)

Link: <https://youtu.be/ItV5p8ZkrdY>

Subsection 8

Supplies and Pack Carrying.

Bert Kienzle arranged for supply dumps to be established at regular intervals along the track using the labour of a team of local men from several tribes. He estimated that carrying only foodstuffs, a carrier could last for 13 days, six only if shared with a soldier. And this did not include munitions, equipment, medical stores or the many other items to sustain an army.⁵ While he established the essential teams of local carriers, it was far below the efforts needed as time went by.

Air drops were initiated over two small lake beds at Myola, a wilderness area about half way along the track. DC3 planes dropped supplies here, often with only 30% success as loads were destroyed or lost. Some vital and promised supplies at the height of engagement were not even sent. When an initial drop killed a soldier with a tin of biscuits, these movements were called ‘biscuit bombers.’

The soldiers carried as much as they could. They packed their haversacks as lightly as possible, and even cut their towels and toothbrushes in half. The standard pack contained: two shirts, a pair of shorts, underpants, a pullover, equipment pouches, six days rations of bully beef and biscuits, one dehydrated emergency ration and one chocolate emergency ration, a dixie and mug, ...medical supplies, ...toilet gear a groundsheet, ...half blanket and half a mosquito net. This weighed 40 - 45 pounds (18 – 20 kg), plus a rifle with bayonet and 50 rounds of ammunition.

For consideration:

Those who have walked the track in peace time can only wonder how a soldier managed more than a normal pack and had to survive the challenges of war. Walking the track forms an appreciation of the effort, persistence and sheer bloody mindedness shown by the troops.

Brief comments by veterans on SUPPLIES AND PACK CARRYING

- Peter Holloway – packing the biscuit bombers (00.05-01.10)
- Cec Driscoll – food drops at Myola (01.10-02.28)

Link: <https://youtu.be/haMnFvZC2SQ>

Subsection 9.

The First Engagements.

The Japanese army, the Nankai Shitai, landed at Buna on the Northern beaches 21 July 1942 and rapidly moved towards Kokoda. They executed European missionaries on this advance and today's Martyrs' School at Popondetta is a memorial to them. By then, B Company had crossed the track and was stationed at Kokoda under the leadership of Captain Templeton, an older man who won deep respect from his company. The 11th Platoon and the Papuan infantry engaged with the enemy at Awala, on the further side of the Wairopi Bridge over the swiftly flowing Kumasi River. They were forced to retreat to Oivi where they were joined by the 12th Platoon and Commander Lieutenant-Colonel Owen who had flown into Kokoda from Port Moresby. C Company began the walk over the track on 24 July to join up with the now engaged B Company. The next day Templeton's men were joined by some of the 16th Platoon of B Company. They marched immediately to Oivi to assist the two exhausted platoons that were under constant attack. Templeton set out to Kokoda to fetch reinforcements and was killed shortly after he left this engagement. Retreating from Oivi to reassemble at Deniki, Paull describes their effort:

They descended a steep bank into Oivi Creek and travelled along the course of the stream. Sometimes waist deep in icy waters...The men groped their way blindly in the intense darkness, clutching the bayonet scabbard or webbing straps of the man immediately ahead, yet even this journey provided its sample of the Australian soldier's irrepressible humour, in the advice addressed to the column by a man who had seized a handful of phosphorescent fungus: "Grab yourself some headlights, fellas."⁴

They reassembled at Deniki to guard the entrance to the track, but moved to Kokoda when they discovered that the enemy had not yet occupied that settlement.

For Consideration:

What do you think is the value of humour in a life or death situation? Is this an Australian characteristic? Extreme circumstances can bring out unknown strengths. The capabilities of

⁴Paull, op. cit p.55

most of us are greater than we would imagine, and surprise us when circumstances call for great efforts.

Brief comments by veterans on their FIRST ENGAGEMENTS

- Jo Dawson – the first engagements (00.04 – 03.07)
- Don Daniels – holding Kokoda (03.06 – 03.54)

Link: <https://youtu.be/HzGAEQnM47s>



Equipment carried by Australian soldiers in the Kokoda campaign.

Photo courtesy Kokoda Historical

Subsection 10.

The Limits of Endurance?

On 28 July, as the soldiers withdrew from the Oivi attack, they found Kokoda as yet unoccupied by the enemy. But next day, after a ferocious attack, it fell and amongst the casualties was the Commander Lieutenant-Colonel Owen. The troops retreated to Deniki, the first village along the track. Historian Peter Brune describes the state of the troops at Deniki: for the raw teenagers, appallingly equipped, untrained and unsure venturers in a strange environment, the arduous week of combat, the lack of sleep and food and the tragic loss of the brave Templeton and Owen combined to foster feelings of isolation and despair⁵.

The diggers reconcentrated at Deniki. Brune described the dangerous situation:

“the Australian force was to have two exacting enemies – the Japanese and the limiting and debilitating supply situation which inhibited the commander's ability to concentrate his force and left the soldier underfed, ill equipped, poorly clothed, cold and wet.”⁶

Major Cameron arrived at Deniki to take command on 4 August. He was critical of the survivors of B Company who had retreated from Ovi, and a soldier's diary recorded that “Cameron was very bitter towards [these] men. Says that they are cowards.”⁵ Cameron then proceeded to raise a second attack on Kokoda to recapture the airfield.



The track near Oivi, between Kokoda and Wairopi

Men returning from Oivi.. Facing p. 110. *To Kokoda and Beyond. The Story of the 39th Battalion 1941-1943.*
The Official History of 39th Battalion Compiled By Victor Austen 1988

⁵Peter Brune, *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes*. Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards 1991. p.54

⁶Ibid p.50

For Consideration:

How important is morale in facing difficulties?

If you had done your best and were judged to have failed, how would you maintain morale?

Brief comments by veterans on their LIMITS OF ENDURANCE

- Joe Dawson remembers poor health and ‘half starved’ (00.04 – 02.05)
- Don Daniels remembers no sleep and limited rations (02.05 – 03.29)

Link: <https://youtu.be/SGG-JDsmJPs>



Never Giving Up. The “Mates” sculpture. Kokoda Terrace, Dandenong Ranges National Park, Victoria.

Subsection 11.

To Defeat and Beyond

Major Cameron decided to retake Kokoda, and on 8 August, sent three parties to regain control of the airstrip. They were vastly outnumbered and were forced back through jungle and a rubber plantation towards Deniki after two and a half days of intense fighting. But some of the qualities that sustained the legend of Kokoda were already apparent. Peter Brune refers to one incident about Jim Cowey: “Jim's motto was if you were a ‘digger’ he had to get you out.”⁷ This attitude was shared through all the campaigns; it is the embodiment of mateship. Irreverence is always there, as witnessed by the incident of the supply plane that dropped its supplies by error to the enemy. Paull wrote: “The heat of the Australians' vehemence could have scorched the vegetation around them.”⁸ The attack failed, and the Japanese sustained their attack as the troops retreated to Deniki. Then there was a fighting withdrawal which found the 39th now retreated to the village of Isurava. They were exhausted and proceeded to dig in at that village using bully beef tins and tin helmets. Peter Brune refers to the 39th Battalion as “survivors, who had withstood all that the Japanese had thrown against them [they] had begun to develop into hardened veterans; they had lost a battle but had gained experience.”⁹



The Kokoda airstrip.
p. 78 *To Kokoda and Beyond*, Victor Austen, 1988

⁷ Brune op. cit p.68

⁸ Paull op.cit p.79

⁹ Brune op.cit. p. 70

For Consideration

It is often said that the darkest hour is the hour before dawn. Within days, this dejected group of young men rose bravely to the challenge and achieved a legend. There was a shortage of equipment, food, reinforcements, and an enemy that outnumbered them 5:1 and growing with fresh troops, led by Major Horii, and energised by supplies landed at Buna. Yet these men fought with incredible determination and held the enemy from advancing for four days. These were the days that it is argued saved Australia, for the enemy was ultimately defeated by the collapse of their supply chains. The enemy had allowed themselves 8 days to conquer the Track before attacking Port Moresby. Thus, time became a winning factor in the strategy to eventually exhaust the enemy, which did happen at Imita Ridge, close to Port Moresby, when the enemy declared a retreat. As Port Moresby was held, the possibility of an invasion of mainland Australia faded.

The vital question is: how could a demoralised group of inexperienced young men achieve, in such a rapid turn around, the greatness that is celebrated with deserved honour in our national history?

Brief comments by veterans on their DEFEAT AND BEYOND

- Don Daniels remembers Jim Cowey (00.04 – 01.10)
- Don Daniels talks of “digging in” (01.10 – 02.23)

Link: <https://youtu.be/rZRLTJzqjYo>

Subsection 12

The Battle of Isurava

This battle is now regarded as one of the key battles in the history of Australia. It began with a handful of exhausted men who withstood the superior numbers of the enemy with great courage. It ended in a withdrawal along the track after four days during which the seasoned 12 Brigade fought alongside the exhausted Battalion. The early battles fell entirely to the inexperienced 39th. After Isurava the battles continued until the 39th was eventually rested at Efogi, half way back along the track.

The 39th Battalion withstood the initial heavy frontal attack, which began in the morning of the 26 August at 7.00 a.m. They faced the full fury of the Japanese by themselves, 300 men against over about 1,200 enemy. Relief came mid-afternoon that day with the 2/14 and the two forces, the 'choco' soldiers of the 39th and the professional AIF, became one body against the enemy. While the fresh troops gave impetus and relief to the 39th Battalion who were by this stage exhausted, there was no let up in the fighting. Peter Brune tells of the effect the arrival of the AIF had on the men: Captain Steward of the 2/16 Battalion described the men of the 39th at Isurava: "...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..."¹⁰

Sergeant John Manol of the 39th expressed relief at the arrival of the AIF "...this bloke jumped into our pit and I thought 'Jesus! He's a bloody nip!' 'Green uniform' I said, 'Where are you from? Who are you?' 'We're the 2/14th.' I thought Christ had come down again! We all did. We thought of them as Gods, these blokes. They were tall and they were trained... Clean uniforms, they were trained whereas you'd look around at your mates and their eyes were sunk back in their heads and they were paler and dirty and grubby."¹¹

¹⁰ Brune op.cit. P.98

¹¹ ibid p.98

Japanese later reflections marvelled at the tenacity of the Australians who fought in extreme circumstances at close quarters, often with the bayonet, against a better armed enemy. One group of the 39th, sent for medical attention before the attack and were resting at Alola, the next village along the track, returned still battered and unseen by medical staff and under equipped, to support their mates. A legend was born on that day.

This battle made demands on men who had few resources, were nursing prior injuries and had known little rest, as the enemy was constantly setting ambushes or more direct attacks and who were in poor physical conditions. Yet their efforts awed even the professional soldiers. Within the troops was a vein of resilience that gave them the guts to rise to the enormity of the challenge.



Isurava Memorial.

The Four Pillars bear the words Courage, Endurance, Sacrifice, and Mateship.

Photo by Ross Darrigan, 39th Bn Assoc. member

To think about: Viewing the memorial is not time to discuss but to remember and affirm the qualities celebrated in this memorial.

Brief comments by veterans on THE BATTLE OF ISURARVA

- Joe Dawson - memories of the Battle of Isurarva (00.04 – 03.06)
- John Dawes – memories of the Battle of Isurarva (03.06 – 04.50)
- Don Daniels – memories of the Battle of Isurarva (04.50 – 07.30)

Link: <https://youtu.be/NvFaq2GBFCo>

Subsection 13

Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Honner



Ralph Honner, who replaced Captain Cameron, arrived unexpectedly at Isurava 16 August 1942. The 39th had made fighting retreats from engagements beyond Kokoda, then from Kokoda to Deniki and then to Isurava. They were exhausted.

Honner described the state of the militia:

“Physically the pathetically young warriors of the 39th were in poor shape. Worn out by strenuous fighting and exhausting movement, and weakened by the lack of food and sleep and shelter, many of them had literally come to a standstill. Practically every day torrential rains fell through the afternoon and night, cascading into their cheerless weapon -pits and soaking the clothes they wore – the only ones they had. In these they shivered throughout the long vigil of the lonely nights when they were required to stand awake and alert but still and silent. Only the morning brought a gleam of comfort- a turn at sleeping and forgetting, a chance perhaps, to lie and dry in the warmth of the glowing day”.¹³

Honner was an experienced soldier with time in the Middle East conflicts, but how could even an experienced leader turn around exhausted and dispirited men to reenergise to the extent that they so heroically fought the key battle of Isurava?

Honner was a superb tactician. He quickly assessed the situation, and after consultation with the captains, placed B Company - that company which had the stigma of cowardice- in the most vital and dangerous deployment. This was the place of honour and all troops responded warmly to this trust. He was always calm, even under fire he made considered decisions. He toured the perimeters of battle and thus identified himself with his men. His calm, confident and authoritative manner was widely appreciated. Brune highlighted his qualities as having ‘moral courage’ and ‘creative intellect’.¹⁴

¹³ Honner’s writings, quote from Peter Brune, *We Band of Brothers*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 2000

¹⁴ Peter Brune, *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes*. p.153

Isurava village was at the edge of a form of escarpment looking back to Kokoda. Heavy jungle to the North lay ahead of a short clearing. To the East was an extremely steep valley to Eora creek, at least 300 meters down. On the other side of this valley on which the village of Asigari perched was an alternative track through which the enemy could proceed and then attack from the rear, which would annihilate the Australians. To the West was a higher ridge, near Nauro village, intensely clad in jungle, from which the enemy could fire downwards.

The spirited defence is only possible if morale is high, and this stems back to the leader.

To consider:

In all difficult situations, a leader makes a huge difference. Is this general statement applicable to all situations people have experienced?

What are the qualities of a good leader?

Thinking of Honner, what qualities, in order of one's judgment, are most valuable?

Brief comments by veterans on LTCOL Ralph Honner

- Joe Dawson speaks of LTCOL Ralph Honner (00.04 – 02.15)
- Don Daniels remembers LTCOL Ralph Honner (02.15 – 03.39)

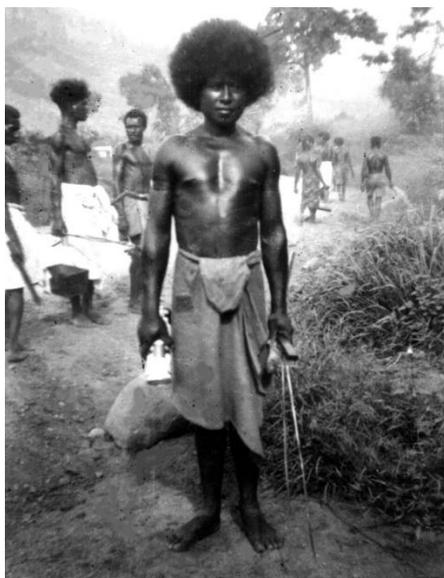
Link: <https://youtu.be/PynzK77MOvo>

Subsection 14

The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels.

Initially Herbert (Bert) Bert Kienzle, a gold miner and planter in the Yodda Valley, organised a team of 140 carriers from 10 different Papuan tribes for the 8th July initial trip over the Owen Stanleys. This was not only to assist with carrying B company's needs, but also to establish supply hubs over the track. When A company left some days later for their journey, the team of carriers had expanded to 400, but it was clear that air drops over Myola were necessary, as the teams could not meet the needs. Paul Ham claimed that most carriers were not volunteers, but were employed or conscripted by the Australian government, and that some deserted¹⁵. Up to 3,000 men were employed to serve as carriers, a job that was dangerous and exhausting.

But this is not to decry the legend. Many of the carriers gave of their last ounce of energy to serve the troops, and most importantly, to serve as stretcher bearers for the wounded. In the battles that marked the retreat from Kokoda, many wounded suffered great privation. The walking wounded were expected to walk, and in too many instances, to crawl, over the steep and enemy infested track. Teams of stretcher bearers were 8 in number to each wounded soldier. These men cared for their charges, and practically never left their patient until the journey was over. The high regard shown to these carriers is enshrined in the affectionate term “the fuzzy-wuzzy angels.”



A Fuzzy Wuzzy angel who helped the Australian soldiers, especially the wounded.
P110 Mud over Blood Revisited . Carl Johnson, 2012

¹⁵ Ham, op.cit. p. 212

For Consideration

While these men have received accolades for their service from the diggers who they saved, it took many years for the Australian government to award pensions in return for their sacrifices. Just as in 2020 during the COVID-19 responses, for those who did not lead but who served - the many workers who were exposed to the virus in order to maintain community services - appreciation was expressed for their work. Australians were reminded that appreciation does not belong only to leaders and those in the public eye, but to the worker who gives unsung service who is just as significant in value. The Fuzzy-Wuzzy Angels deserve an honoured place in our history.

Brief comments by veterans on THE FUZZY WUZZY ANGELS

- Don Daniels speaks in appreciation of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels (00.04 – 01.18)
- John Dawes – speaks of the native carriers (01.18 – 02.04)

Link: <https://youtu.be/Dp8e2RiC8Lg>



Photograph by George Silk appearing in *War in New Guinea, Official War Photographs of the Battle For Australia 1942*

Subsection 15

Retreat from Isurava

The intensely fought retreat along the track, which ended with the enemy's defeat, was a bitterly fought war of survival. The 39th was joined by the 2/14 on 22 August, and along with the 2/16, a war of close combat ultimately defeated the enemy. Close combat meant that, for in the jungle, and in the dark, the enemy sometimes came within centimetres of Australians. Peter Brune described the strategy:

From 31 August until 15 September a decisive game of 'cat and mouse' was staged along the Kokoda trail...Exhausted, sleepless and hungry men were required company by company, platoon by platoon, to hurriedly withdraw, stop, prepare positions, defend dourly, until their comrades could pass through their positions, and then often within a mere 20 or 30 yards of the enemy, break contact at dawn, or dusk, or perhaps late at night and trudge wearily up hill and down to repeat the process – again and again. To withdraw too early was to allow the enemy a too speedy acquisition of ground. To withdraw too late meant outflanking, encirclement and annihilation¹⁶.

This staged retreat was characterised by hand to hand fighting, where survival or not was achieved by close surveillance and by a readiness for combat. But the 39th were given no rest, taking up positions with the AIF in a unity of purpose. They were withdrawn at Menari when 2/27th took over responsibilities and the 185 survivors of the 39th marched to Menari where they were addressed by their commander, Ralph Honner and marched towards Port Moresby for rest.

¹⁶ Brune Op. cit p.138



The Parade at Menari.

p.174 *To Kokoda and Beyond*. Victor Austen. 1988

For Consideration.

Where does one find the strength to go on when all strength has been sapped?

What would have been the consequences if the battle was lost?

Brief comments by a veteran on the RETREAT FROM ISURAVA

- John Dawes – remembers the retreat from Isurava (00.04 – 05.14)

Link: <https://youtu.be/kAmvNxuUj8Q>

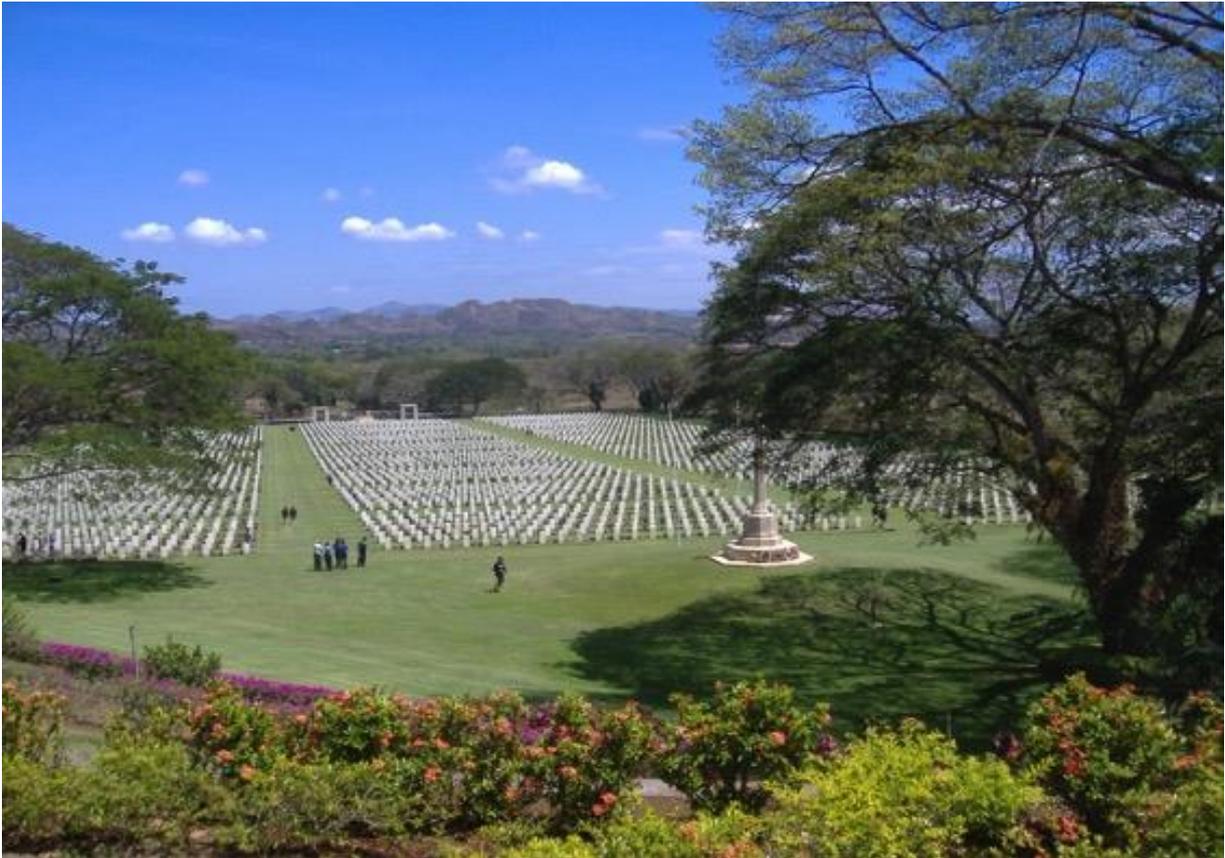
Conclusion.

The Battalion was disbanded shortly after the Papuan campaign, its small numbers absorbed by the 30th Brigade, but the members maintained connections. They marched proudly under the banner at ANZAC Day functions, and at special services each year on or around 8 August at the Shrine in Melbourne, commemorating their early, but brief success, when they reoccupied the Kokoda airstrip in the first days of the campaign. Some members arranged visits with their Japanese foes. One meeting reported that the Nankai Shitai thought they faced 10,000 strong on the Kokoda track, “not, for the first two months of battle, just one battalion of young and untested men – the 39th Battalion – only some 600 strong.”¹ Some recent studies have assumed titles as “*Those Ragged Bloody Heroes*” and “*We Band of Brothers*” which in itself commemorates the mateship and hardships faced. The 39th Australian Infantry Battalion (1941-43) Association has honoured these men in the intervening years, and the Association continues to celebrate their extraordinary achievements and values and to organise reunions. They have provided personal support as well as ensuring government entitlements were provided over the years. To honour the men of the 39th Battalion, on Kokoda Day, 8th August 2006, the 39th name was restored as the 39th Personnel Support Battalion (39thPSB). But has now changed to the 39th Operational Support Battalion.



Headstone of an unknown soldier marked, 'Known unto God'

Photo by Mary Holloway 39th Bn Assoc. member



Australian War Graves Commission- Bomana Cemetery, Port Moresby

We honour the known and unknown soldiers



Melbourne ANZAC Day March 2009

Photos on this page by Mary Holloway, 39th Bn. Assoc. member

YOUTUBE RESOURCES

Extracts from interviews with 39th Australian Infantry Battalion veterans

SUBSECTION 1 THE 39TH BATTALION AND THE KOKODA TRACK

No video available

SUBSECTION 2 Video 2: ENLISTMENT AND TRAINING

- John Dawes – enlisting at 16 ½ years old (00.40 – 02.51)
- Don Daniels – enlists at 17 years old (02.52 – 03.40)
- Cec Driscoll talks about joining the 39th Battalion (03.40 – 04.33)
- George Cops – remembers the early days (04.34 – 05.50)

Link: <https://youtu.be/k1Xz0rwT2V0>

SUBSECTION 3 Video 3: EMBARKATION

- Don Daniels – told to take tennis racquets (00.04 – 00.32)
- George Cops – arriving in Port Moresby (00.33 – 01.57)

Link: https://youtu.be/7nfV0T4i_aU

SUBSECTION 4 Video 4: FIRST ACTION

- Cec Driscoll – thoughts on being in action for the first time (00.04.- 00.52)
- John Dawes – remembers his first action (00.53 – 02.15)
- Peter Holloway’s feelings of his first encounter (02.16 – 04.04)

Link: <https://youtu.be/QkvGL1DJPeI>

SUBSECTION 5 THE KOKODA TRACK

No video available

SUBSECTION 6 Video 6: WALKING THE TRACK

- George Cops – the beauty and otherwise of the track (00.05 – 04.16).
- Joe Dawson - walking the track (04.16 – 06.07)
- Cec Driscoll – “it was tough” (06.08 – 07.30)
- John Dawes – recalls walking the Kokoda Track (07.03 – 08.59)
- George Cops – difficulties of walking the track (09.00 – 09.57)

Link <https://youtu.be/MUPNezDp-G0>

SUBSECTION 7 Video 7: PREPARING THE TRACK FOR WAR

- Cec Driscoll remembers Bert Kienzle (00.05 – 00.57)

Link: <https://youtu.be/ItV5p8ZkrdY>

SUBSECTION 8 Video 8: SUPPLIES AND PACK CARRYING

- Peter Holloway – packing the supplies for the biscuit bombers (00.05 – 01.10)
- Cec Driscoll – food drops at Myola (01.10 – 02.28)

Link: <https://youtu.be/haMnFvZC2SQ>

SUBSECTION 9 Video 9: THE FIRST ENGAGEMENTS

- Joe Dawson – the first engagements (00.04 – 03.07)
- Don Daniels – holding Kokoda (03.06 – 03.54)

Link: <https://youtu.be/HzGAEQnM47s>

SUBSECTION 10 Video 10: THE LIMITS OF ENDURANCE

- Joe Dawson remembers poor health and being “half starved” (00.04 – 02.05)
- Don Daniels remembers no sleep and limited rations (02.05 – 03.29)

Link <https://youtu.be/SGG-JDsmJPs>

SUBSECTION 11 Video 11: TO DEFEAT AND BEYOND

- Don Daniels remembers Jim Cowey (00.04 – 01.10)
- Don Daniels talks of “digging in” (01.10 – 02.23)

Link: <https://youtu.be/rZRLTJzqiYo>

SUBSECTION 12 Video 12: THE BATTLE OF ISURAVA

- Joe Dawson - memories of the Battle of Isurarva (00.04 – 03.06)
- John Dawes – memories of the Battle of Isurarva (03.06 – 04.50)
- Don Daniels – memories of the Battle of Isurarva (04.50 – 07.30)

Link <https://youtu.be/NvFaq2GBFCo>

SUBSECTION 13 Video 13: LTCOL RALPH HONNER

- Joe Dawson speaks of LTCOL Ralph Honner (00.04 – 02.15)
- Don Daniels remembers LTCOL Ralph Honner (02.15 – 03.39)

Link: <https://youtu.be/PynzK77MOvo>

SUBSECTION 14 Video 14: THE FUZZY WUZZY ANGELS

- Don Daniels speaks in appreciation of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels (00.04 – 01.18)
- John Dawes – speaks of the native carriers (01.18 – 02.04)

Link: <https://youtu.be/Dp8e2RiC8Lg>

SUBSECTION 15 Video 15: RETREAT FROM ISURAVA

- John Dawes – remembers the retreat from Isurava (00.04 – 05.14)

Link: <https://youtu.be/kAmvNxuUj8Q>

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Acknowledgements

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Further Reading

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