

Seventh-day Adventists and the Kokoda Track in World War II, Papua New Guinea

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Kokoda Track

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

The Kokoda Track traverses the Owen Stanley Range, which run the length of Papua New Guinea and traditionally separate Papua from New Guinea.

There are no vehicular roads that cross the mountain range. A number of Seventh-day Adventist villages along the track played a key role in World War II.

Geography of the Track

The Kokoda track led in a north easterly direction from Port Moresby and over the rugged Owen Stanley Range to Gona, Sanananda, and Buna on the north coast.

Beginning at Port Moresby, the road was relatively easy to traverse to Bisiatabu, Ilolo, and Ower's Corner. The track then descended to Goldie Creek at Uberi. It then rose sharply to Imita Ridge and descended again to Ua-

Ule Creek, rising once more to Ioribaiwa. Then there was another steep descent to Ofi Creek and a stiff climb to Nauro near Maguli Peak. The track plunged again into Brown River near Menari. There were more ridges before climbing to the district of Efogi, Kagi, and Envilogo. The mountains continued to rise to Myola and the invisible border between Papua and New Guinea. After the highest peak there was a precipitous descent through Oro province to the north coast, passing through Eora Creek, Isurava, Deniki, Kokoda, Oivi, Gorari, Wairopi, and Awala toward Buna.¹

Seventh-day Adventist Locations

The Seventh-day Adventist mission stations were all located on the Papuan side of the border. Bisiatabu was the main station. Efogi was established later, and from this center there grew smaller stations at Menari, Kagi, and Envilogo. When war came to the track, church members abandoned their villages and moved away from the ribbon of jungle where the conflict raged, setting up temporary shelters and planting new gardens to sustain themselves during the "taim nogut," or time of trouble. Bisiatabu station was commandeered for the Royal Papuan Constabulary.²

The Battle

In mid-1942 the Japanese troops invaded the north coast. In that locality were stationed a few hundred members of the Papuan Infantry Battalion and the Maroubra Force composed of five hundred raw recruits from Victoria disparaged as "chocolate soldiers," meaning ones that would melt in the sun before enemy fire. However, no one surrendered because they had heard of the Japanese massacre of unarmed prisoners at Tol Tol Plantation. Contrary to expectations, they fought bravely in many rearguard actions, but only 32 survived the war.³

The Japanese estimated it would take them ten days to reach Port Moresby, so they took very few provisions with them and raided local gardens as they advanced. The allies were beaten back to Oivi and Kokoda and Deniki. At that stage reinforcements began to arrive from Port Moresby, and a push was made to recapture Kokoda. This attempt was unsuccessful, and the allies retreated farther back to Isurava.⁴ By early September they had fallen back to Efogi, where they became surrounded by the Japanese and had to fight one of the most horrific delaying battles, costing 62 Australian lives. Some lost their sense of direction while fighting through the Japanese lines and took days to link up with their brigade.⁵ The Japanese kept advancing through Menari and on to Ioribaiwa. After 62 days, with supply lines cut off and hunger forcing them to cannibalize fallen Australians, the Japanese turned and were pursued by the Allies back to the north coast. It is estimated that thirteen thousand Japanese infantry and two thousand Australian infantry perished during the engagement of six months.⁶

“Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels”

Up to fifty thousand local men were conscripted from all over Papua New Guinea to carry food and ammunition to the front lines and stretch the wounded on their return trips.⁷ They were dubbed the fuzzy wuzzy angels because of their hairstyle and dedication to their work.⁸ Each one carried a stout stick from the jungle to steady his trek on the steep trail. Their bare feet acted like crab's claws, finding leverage on the tree roots buried in the deep mud. Some broke down and deserted, but never on the return journey with a wounded man in their care. At night they would stay awake feeding the wounded with teaspoons of milk powder paste.⁹ It was a hellish task in the cold and rain, coping with dying men in pain. Some of the wounded were hallucinating; others were racked with pneumonia, malaria, or dysentery so bad it was often advisable to cut the seat out of a man's trousers. The stench of vomit and feces and sweat was always present. The carrier's food and wages were meagre, but the soldiers often rewarded them with mirrors, pocket knives, razor blades, and wax matches.¹⁰

Seventh-day Adventist Involvement

No record was kept of the Adventists among the fuzzy wuzzy angels. The small number who were involved spoke little of their experience. The evidence is fragmentary. One example is the story of lost Australian soldiers fleeing the battle at Efogi that is told elsewhere (see Faole Adobo), but Faole was not employed as a fuzzy wuzzy angel. Faole Bokoi of Menari village was definitely a fuzzy wuzzy angel and probably a Seventh-day Adventist.¹¹ The same applies to Havala Laula of Kagi village.¹² An Adventist teacher, Soge by name, was conscripted and made overseer of a plantation that supplied food for the troops.¹³

Missionary Charles Mitchell later identified four young Adventists who served in an active role with the allied soldiers. Their home villages were on the south coast at Aroma, Wanigela, and Korela. One was Alupuka, a nurse who had trained under missionary Alma Wiles. He served as a stretcher bearer. Another was Quarapuni, who married Abi, eldest daughter of Faole Adobo. Quarapuni was a teacher at Efogi and served as a carrier for the troops. His half-brother, Lalama, was drafted into the armed forces and saw active duty against the Japanese all the way to Buna and Gona. Auima, a teacher, was given charge of a group of fuzzy wuzzy angels. He was engaged carrying the wounded until the final battles at Buna, when he himself became ill and had to be hospitalised. When he was discharged, it took him six weeks to walk over the mountains, arriving home to his family in a very poor condition.¹⁴ Apparently there were no Seventh-day Adventist fatalities on the Kokoda Track during the conflict.

Aftermath

The Adventist mission stations along the Kokoda Track were trashed during the war. Gardens had to be replanted. Village homes had to be rebuilt. Schools and churches had to be made serviceable again. Experienced

carpenters were dispatched from Australia to expedite the work. The rebuilding program utilized abandoned army materials purchased at fire-sale prices.¹⁵

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NOTES

1. Peter FitzSimons, *Kokoda* (Australia: Hodder Headline, 2004), [xvi, xx].
2. E[ric] A. Boehm, "A Returned Missionary Surveys the Field," *Australasian Record*, May 28, 1945, 3, 4.
3. David Mulligan, *Angels of Kokoda* (Sydney, NSW: Hyde Park Press, 2006), 99–101, 207.
4. *Ibid.*, 112–121.
5. "Brigade Hill—Papua New Guinea," *Australian Army*, December 4, 2016, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.army.gov.au/our-history/history-in-focus/brigade-hill-papua-new-guinea>.

6. Mulligan, 147, 160, 207, 401.
7. Guy Barnett, "89 Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels Awarded Medals," *Tasmanian Times*, November 4, 2012, accessed March 31, 2018, <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Space:The-Fuzzy-Wuzzy-Angels>.
8. "The Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels," Kokoda Spirit, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://www.kokodaspirit.com.au/the-fuzzy-wuzzy-angels/>.
9. FitzSimons, 332, 341.
10. Mulligan, 129, 195–201.
11. Barnett.
12. Nic White and April Glover, "Last Kokoda Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel," Daily Mail News Service, December 28, 2017, accessed March 31, 2018, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5216855/Last-Kokoda-Fuzzy-Wuzzy-Angel-Havala-Laula-dies-aged-92.html>.
13. Lester N. Lock, "A Native Teacher Reports," *Australasian Record*, November 11, 1942, 3, 4.
14. C[h]arles E. Mitchell, "Meet the Crew of the Papuan Ship 'Lao-Heni,'" *Australasian Record*, July 21, 1947, 4, 5.
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