CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This book is an examination of the Kokoda campaign – from the Japanese landing in Papua in July 1942 and their advance along the Kokoda Track, to their defeat at Oivi–Gorari in November. The Kokoda campaign is catching up with Gallipoli in popularity, as is apparent from the number of books on it that have appeared in the past twenty-odd years and the thousands of Australians who now walk the Kokoda Track each year.[1] As the events of 1915 pass into distant memory, it is possible that Kokoda might come to rival Gallipoli as the representative Australian military experience. While there are positive aspects to this, as its popularity increases errors in the Kokoda story have a tendency to be repeated until they take on the outward appearance of fact. Other aspects of the campaign, some arising from Australian wartime propaganda, have not been subject to postwar investigation. These two strands combine to create the Kokoda myth. Recent popular accounts, concerned more with colour than precision, perpetuate the myth.[2]

The core of the Kokoda myth is that during the Japanese advance towards Port Moresby the Australians were greatly outnumbered. Those in the front line were convinced of this, and their word has been accepted. Japanese veterans often say the same thing – that the Australians significantly outnumbered them. It may be that in jungle fighting, where the enemy is rarely seen, there is a tendency to imagine that he is in great strength. In truth, during the Japanese advance, the Australians were rarely outnumbered by their enemy. While Australia's 39th Battalion and the Papuan Infantry Battalion faced superior numbers in the small

July clashes, it was not as many as two to one. The forces engaged at Isurava, the first large action, have always been thought to have been at the very least three to one against the Australians and perhaps six to one. In fact the numbers were equal with about 2300 being engaged on either side. With the exception of the first Eora–Templeton's Crossing fighting, where the Japanese did have almost twice as many troops as the Australians, the Australians fought the Japanese at one to one until Ioribaiwa in September, where it was the Australians who outnumbered the Japanese by two to one, yet the Australians were still defeated. During the Australian advance after Ioribaiwa they always maintained a great superiority of numbers over the Japanese.

Numbers are important in war. To have a good prospect of success the attacker should usually have more men than the defender. The firepower of modern weapons so advantage a defender that a three-to-one local superiority is said to be needed to be reasonably certain of success if all other factors are equal. A two-to-one advantage provides a lesser chance of success but will sometimes be enough, and one to one is usually not enough for the attacker to prevail. When numbers alone do not explain victory or defeat – and it is rarely as simple as that – we look to the quality of the troops, their weapons, morale and supply, and how well they were commanded. Each of these elements can powerfully increase fighting power or, to use terms not in use in 1942, they are force multipliers that enhance combat effectiveness. For example, if the attacker's men were of higher quality than those of the defender, or if the attacker had much more artillery or was better supplied, then he might not need any superiority in numbers to win. According to the Kokoda myth, it was the large Japanese numerical superiority that enabled them to advance as far as they did towards Port Moresby. If that is not true then other reasons for the series of Australian defeats on the Kokoda Track between July and September 1942 would be required. One possibility is that the Japanese were qualitatively superior to the Australians.

A central fact of land warfare in the first year of the Japanese offensive in the Pacific from December 1941 is that, man for man, the Japanese proved to be better soldiers than those who opposed them. The proof is that up to the second half of 1942 the Japanese rarely had superior numbers engaged in land battles, yet they rarely lost one. They achieved their victories in Burma, the Dutch East Indies, during the Malayan campaign, in the final battle at Singapore and in the Philippines without a numerical advantage. Only when the Allies had a very considerable superiority, as

at Milne Bay and Guadalcanal, were they able to defeat the Japanese. The Kokoda campaign fits this pattern.

Another force enhancer that might help to explain the early Japanese success and later prolonged defence during the Kokoda campaign is their artillery. Australian postwar accounts show little awareness of the importance of Japanese artillery in explaining the outcome of the battles and have tended to suppose that the Japanese had many mortars but few guns. This error has arisen in part from the mistranslation of the Japanese term for their 70mm battalion gun, the 'gun-mortar', as 'mortar'. There were no Japanese medium or heavy mortars (as distinct from the ubiquitous short-range 'knee mortar') in the Owen Stanley Range. Instead the Nankai Shitai (South Seas Force) carried 16 light artillery pieces to Papua. Most of them were 70mm and 75mm guns; well supplied with ammunition, they had a major influence on the fighting.

It might not be too much to say that most issues of the campaign ought to be reappraised if it can be shown that the Japanese engaged in the battles along the Kokoda Track were many fewer than has been believed. This word *engaged* holds a clue because, while the Nankai Shitai was more than 16 000 strong, the number the Japanese actually committed to battle on the Kokoda Track, which runs from Kokoda south over the Owen Stanley Range towards Port Moresby, was much smaller. In Kokoda in 1967, 39th Battalion held a reunion. There Bert Kienzle, a famous identity of the campaign, spoke of the fighting portion of the Nankai Shitai. He said, 'Ten thousand experienced and highly trained soldiers plus 3000 naval personnel [were] against the Australians.'[3] The Australian official history agreed, calculating that the Nankai Shitai included 'a well-balanced fighting force of 10 000 men'.[4] These numbers have generally been accepted, and accounts continue to claim that the Australians were outnumbered by, for example, ten to one at First Kokoda.[5] The myth of Japanese numerical superiority has continued unaltered since Keinzle spoke more than 45 years ago. The problem for the myth is that of a 16 000-strong force, of which 7000 were fighting troops, no more than 3500 of these actually advanced along the Kokoda Track.

What has occurred in postwar Australian historiography might have something to do with the saying that the victors write the history. This is true as far as it goes, but much of what the victor later writes might not be accurate as it can arise out of his own wartime propaganda. The defeated too has wartime propaganda, but this is swept away postwar as it is immediately seen for what it usually is – falsehood. The victor's propaganda is not subject to the same rigorous reassessment and has a chance

to seep into later accounts and, over time, become entrenched there. Two examples of Australian wartime propaganda still read today, and which stress the Japanese numerical superiority, are George Johnston's *New Guinea Diary* and Osmar White's *Green Armour*, published in 1943 and 1945 respectively.

The Kokoda myth is not only concerned with the relative size of the Japanese and Australian forces. The other elements of the myth are that:

- the Australian fighting retreat along the Kokoda Track saved Port Moresby
- the Japanese were ignorant of conditions in the theatre of war
- the Australians inflicted huge losses on their enemy
- the Japanese conducted the campaign on a shoestring budget; their retreat and defeat was largely because they ran out of supplies
- Allied air power made a major contribution to the Japanese defeat
- the Australians were better prepared medically and lost fewer men to disease, and
- senior Allied commanders were out of touch and junior commanders were sacked unfairly.

Taking each in their turn, the first aspect of the Kokoda myth is that the Australian fighting retreat from July to September saved Port Moresby. While Australian strategy in 1942 has been dealt with in a number of books, little work has been done from the Japanese perspective.[6] The strategic factor that most influenced the strength of Japanese forces in the Owen Stanley Range was Guadalcanal. Within days of the US invasion of that island on 7 August 1942 the Japanese recast their plans. Lieutenant-General Hyakutake Harukichi, commander of Seventeenth Army, ordered Major-General Horii Tomitaro, commander of the Nankai Shitai, to halt his attack on Port Moresby and keep the major part of his force on the northern side of the Owen Stanley Range. Hence from mid-August, before the battle of Isurava, Japan's advance on Port Moresby was put on hold. That Horii was never released from this restriction constitutes the single most important strategic influence upon the course of events along the Kokoda Track. The small force that was permitted to advance south along the track and fought at Efogi (also known as Mission Ridge–Brigade Hill) and Ioribaiwa was tasked with finding a useful position just past the crest of the range and holding it until the situation at Guadalcanal was resolved. Then the main body of Horii's force, with reinforcements, would be released to enter the mountains and march on Port Moresby in combination with an amphibious assault mounted from Milne Bay. The Japanese failed to take Milne Bay

and were defeated at Guadalcanal, so Horii was never given permission to advance on Port Moresby. In short, the Australians on the Kokoda Track cannot have saved Port Moresby when, before the main body of the Nankai Shitai even arrived in Papua, the attack on Port Moresby, the MO operation, was postponed, never to be reactivated.

It is generally held that Japanese intelligence on the theatre of war was poor. This is the second part of the myth. It is said the Japanese knew 'little or nothing of the inland area' of Papua.[7] A commonly used example is that the Japanese believed there was a road from Buna to Port Moresby via Kokoda. It is true one can find the odd ignorant statement of this kind in Japanese soldiers' diaries, but these are rare, often written while the writer was still en route to New Guinea or by low-ranking soldiers with no access to the intelligence used by their commanders to plan the operation. Japanese studies on the tracks over the mountains to Port Moresby, based on prewar visits to Papua and information provided by residents, were reasonably accurate, and they were in no doubt about the difficulty of crossing the Owen Stanley Range along the Kokoda Track and that there was no vehicular road there.

Eastern New Guinea had been under investigation by the Japanese since 1931. By 1938 there was some interest in the route from Sanananda to Kokoda to Port Moresby. In March 1941 Major Toyofuku Tetsuo, later senior intelligence officer of the Nankai Shitai, visited Port Moresby incognito. Armed with Toyufuku's report, serious intelligence studies of the Kokoda Track commenced in January 1942. Two months later Toyufuku was in contact with his main source of information about the track, Josef Anton Hoffstetter, a Swiss resident of New Guinea with Nazi sympathies. By the time the campaign was launched, the Japanese probably knew more about the Kokoda Track than did the Australians.

One author has accused the Japanese of 'creative accounting' in their estimates of the number of enemy they fought and the number of casualties they inflicted.[8] This is a fair criticism. The Japanese in Papua often overestimated the number of Australians they fought and the number of casualties they inflicted. However, the third myth is that the Australians inflicted many more casualties than they lost. In fact the Australians were equally guilty of fabricating impressive but inflated numbers of enemy killed. After the battle of Isurava the Australians reported that they had killed or wounded 700 Japanese. This was an estimate as they could not have known the true figure. The essence of the Kokoda myth is to exaggerate, and decades after World War II the number grew to 1500.[9] Japanese casualty records are not always as accurate as Australian ones, but they

are quite adequate to show that the actual number of Japanese killed and wounded at Isurava was very close to 360.[10] From the Japanese landing in Papua in July 1942 to the end of the battle of Ioribaiwa in September, both sides had lost about 900 battle casualties. Lindsay Mason, a veteran of the campaign, was right to say, 'The fact is we were killing them at about one for one.'[11]

A fourth aspect of the Kokoda myth is the view that the Japanese conducted the Kokoda campaign with a narrow supply margin. Operating on a tight timetable, the Nankai Shitai expected to get from Giruwa, near Buna, to Port Moresby in two weeks carrying virtually all their requirements on the backs of their men. On the contrary, the Nankai Shitai was, from July to September, as well supplied as the Australians. After two months in Papua the most advanced elements of the Nankai Shitai did experience severe shortages for several weeks. Some of this force, the Stanley Detachment of fewer than a thousand men, did suffer all the trials, starvation, even cannibalism, attributed to the whole of the Nankai Shitai in the Kokoda myth, but Japanese supply difficulties have been overstated. The Kokoda myth is narrowly focused on the track itself and, as with some other aspects of the myth, it is necessary to look beyond the track to understand what happened during the Japanese supply crisis. Their food shortage was caused not by unpreparedness but rather by the weather. Four days of heavy rain in mid-September washed away their supply line from Giruwa to Kokoda, north of the Kokoda Track itself, and for two weeks nothing could move along it. Repairs to roads and bridges were made, and supply recovered to an acceptable level.

Linked to Japanese supply is the issue of Allied air interdiction of the Japanese line of communication. The Allied air bombardment of Japanese supply lines is reputed to have caused heavy casualties and contributed to the breakdown of the supply line. Most aspects of the myth have arisen well after World War II, but this one appears to have its origins, like Japanese starvation, in the propaganda of the time. Nankai Shitai casualty returns show that losses to air attack were small and that the Allied destruction from the air of the Japanese bridges over the Kumusi River, a supposed choke point, had little effect on Japanese supply.

The sixth myth is that the Australians took better care of their soldiers and suffered fewer casualties to sickness. The reverse is true. Australian losses to dysentery were extremely high, and it was not until the end of the Kokoda campaign that Japanese losses to medical causes caught up. This error also arose in part from wartime publicity. Much was made in Australian newspapers of the terrible circumstances in which the

Japanese found themselves at the disastrous end of the fighting in Papua at Buna, Sanananda and Gona in January 1943, when they did run out of medical supplies and food. However, this was not the case during the prior Kokoda campaign as the Japanese came to Papua better prepared medically than the Australians and, in the fighting in the mountains up to November 1942, the period covered by this book, the Australians lost far more men to sickness than the Japanese.

The seventh myth concerns senior Allied commanders. It is said that they were out of touch and sacked the operational commanders unfairly: 'Allied victory in Papua had little to do with Blamey and MacArthur and everything to do with the prodigious abilities and courage of a few outstanding officers, and the dogged loyalty and bravery of their men.'[12] General Arthur Allen and Brigadier Arnold Potts, both relieved during the campaign, are two of the 'outstanding officers' commonly associated with this claim. Here it is argued that replacing Potts and Allen was a reasonable course of action. Potts was beaten repeatedly and driven back by a force not at all superior in number to his, and Allen, who outnumbered the Japanese by three to one during the later Australian counter-offensive towards Kokoda, advanced slowly and cautiously, the opposite of what his seniors required and the strategic situation demanded.

There is a part exception to the Kokoda myth. It is the last battle of the campaign at Oivi–Gorari, in early November 1942, where the Australians won a decisive victory. Oivi-Gorari was quite unlike any of the previous battles in that Australian generalship was good, morale was high and the Australians were successful in attacking a prepared position without a very great superiority in numbers. They drove the Japanese from it, and they inflicted far more casualties than they lost.

A curious feature of the widespread yet mistaken view of the Kokoda campaign, here called the Kokoda myth, is that it took hold well after the war ended. The core facet, Japanese strength, was not greatly exaggerated at the time. In September 1942 President Roosevelt complained that the Australians were being pushed back by an inferior enemy force, no more than 4000 strong.[13] The Australian headquarters in Papua, New Guinea Force, had roughly accurate estimates of the size of the Japanese force not too far from Roosevelt's number, and in October Australian newspapers carried stories that the Japanese on the Kokoda Track were not as strong as previously believed. As Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* reported on 8 October 1942, 'Correspondents cautiously suggest … the Japanese were weaker in the Owen Stanleys than we thought …'

There was no change in the 1950s. Raymond Paull's 1958 book *Retreat from Kokoda*, and the official histories, contain only a little of what would become the Kokoda myth. The Australian official history said there were 6000 Japanese on the Kokoda Track, and the United States history, *Victory in Papua*, calculated there were 5000.[14] Scott's 1963 book *The Knights of Kokoda* seems to be the first in which all elements of the myth are in place: the Japanese were in immense strength, 10 000 or so; they knew nothing about the theatre of war; MacArthur treated his Australian subordinates poorly; the Australians inflicted huge losses on the Japanese, and so forth.[15]

With the increasing interest in Australia about the Kokoda campaign, myth-making gathered steam. In 1981 Timothy Hall wrote *New Guinea 1942–44*, followed by Lex McAulay's 1991 *Blood and Iron* and Peter Brune's book *A Bastard of a Place* in 2003. In 2004 Paul Ham and Peter Fitzsimons both published books called *Kokoda*, and in 2005 there was Patrick Lyndsay's *Spirit of Kokoda*. Some, like Sublet's *Kokoda to the Sea* (2000) and McAulay's *Blood and Iron*, do not intentionally mythologise, but others do. Garth Pratten's comment on Peter Brune's series of books, which was combined into *A Bastard of a Place*, could be applied to other authors. Brune, wrote Pratten, desired 'to turn the Papua campaign into a great national myth, replete with heroes and villains'.[16] Two biographies, Bill Edgar's *Warrior of Kokoda* about Brigadier Arnold Potts, and Stuart Braga's *Kokoda Commander* about Major-General Arthur Allen, do of necessity embrace elements of the myth to defend the subjects of their books. If, for instance, Potts was not outnumbered at Isurava and Efogi – and he was not – then it is more difficult to argue that he did extremely well. Edgar assessed that there were 6000 Japanese facing Potts at Efogi, four times the actual number.[17]

The myth-making has not gone unnoticed. Professor Hank Nelson has pointed to aspects of it, which he summed up in a 2009 article. The Kokoda campaign, he said, 'has been burdened with exaggeration':

> Kokoda did not save Australia from invasion, or even Port Moresby from capture. The limited numbers, firepower and fitness of a Japanese force that had struggled across the Owen Stanley Ranges was not going to take Port Moresby unaided, as both the Australian and the Japanese commanders knew before the Japanese began their retreat in September 1942. Kokoda was not as important as Guadalcanal in determining the direction of the war in the south and south-west Pacific; Guadalcanal involved more ships, aircraft and

> ground troops and consumed Japanese units from the three services that would otherwise have been used in Papua.[18]

Dr David Stevens has also written of problems in the way the Kokoda campaign has been presented in a chapter of *Zombie Myths* entitled 'Australia's Thermopylae? The Kokoda Trail'.[19]

The attempt to debunk Kokoda myths is not intended to denigrate the Australians who fought on the Kokoda Track. Their bravery and fortitude is not in question. It is rather that the current interpretation of the campaign is invalid. This book is an attempt to set aside the myth of Kokoda and replace it with the reality and, as the evidence that undoes the myth comes mainly from Japanese sources (see Note on Sources), it follows that more than half the book concerns the Nankai Shitai. The unfortunate contribution of Australian popular military history to the strength of the Kokoda myth was discussed earlier, but the problem is broader than that. The Kokoda myth has arisen because there exists a gap in Australian historiography: a wide range of Japanese sources have not hitherto been examined, although Raymond Paull, Lex McAulay and Paul Ham have all made some effort to do so. The result is a lack of balance in our understanding of the Kokoda campaign, a natural outcome, for if we try to explain an historical event involving two belligerents using sources from only one of them, then we should hardly expect to get it right.

CHAPTER 2

STRATEGY

The Japanese plan for the invasion of Papua had a solid strategic foundation and was much more than the opportunistic and rapid dash for Port Moresby it is characterised as being in the Kokoda myth.[1] The opportunism was supposed to have occurred when, after the failure of the sea attack on Port Moresby at the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Japanese suddenly switched to a landward approach whereby the main attack came along the Kokoda Track and was to arrive at Port Moresby at the same time as a secondary amphibious attack launched from Milne Bay. In fact a land approach from the north coast of Papua was always the preferred option. The myth, with its sights firmly on the Kokoda Track, also misses the point that the Japanese were not in Papua just to take Port Moresby. They were there to forestall an Allied offensive by occupying sites of importance regardless of whether or not their assault on Port Moresby went ahead. Japanese strategy in Papua in 1942 was essentially defensive – an Allied counter-offensive was expected from Australia, and Papua was to be seized and the Allied advance halted there. Major bases were to be built in the Buna–Giruwa–Gona area and at Milne Bay, with a lesser base at Kokoda. Port Moresby was a highly desirable, but not essential, part of the plan.

AIRFIELDS AND AIRCRAFT CARRIERS

The strategic consideration that persuaded the Japanese to launch a land campaign in Papua, which would probably involve an attempt to take