The Kokoda Campaign 1942
Myth and reality

The fighting on the Kokoda Track in World War II is second only to Gallipoli in the Australian national consciousness. The Kokoda campaign of 1942 has taken on mythical status in Australian military history. According to the legend, Australian soldiers were vastly outnumbered by the Japanese, who suffered great losses in battle and as a result of the harsh conditions of the Kokoda Track.

In this important book, Peter Williams seeks to dispel the Kokoda myth. Using extensive research and Japanese sources, he explains what really happened on the Kokoda Track in 1942. Unlike most other books written from an Australian perspective, The Kokoda Campaign 1942: Myth and reality focuses on the strategies, tactics and battle plans of the Japanese and shows that the Australians were in fact rarely outnumbered.

For the first time, this book combines narrative with careful analysis to present an undistorted picture of the events of the campaign. It is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the truth of the Kokoda campaign of 1942.

Peter Williams is a researcher for the Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal and is a military historian for the Darwin Military Museum.
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Myth and Reality
Peter Williams

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More information
I dedicate this book to my children,
Catherine and Michael Williams
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KEY TO MILITARY SYMBOLS

- Unit headquarters
- Infantry
- Artillery
- Engineer
- Imperial japanese Navy troops
- Unit reinforced
- Part of unit detached
- Platoon equivalent
- Company equivalent
- Battalion equivalent
- Regiment equivalent
- Brigade equivalent
- Division
- Area in a state of defence
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Names are written in their correct order. Australian and American names have the family name last, Japanese names have the family name first.

The country now called Papua New Guinea was in 1942 divided into two. The northern half was New Guinea and the southern half was Papua. When referring to the whole of what is now Papua New Guinea the term ‘New Guinea’ has been used.

Villages in Papua are often not where they were in 1942. For this reason it is useful to refer in the text to a village’s wartime or postwar location.

Buna is the word Australians use to describe the 18-kilometre strip of Papuan coast between Gona and Cape Endiadere, where the Japanese landed, developed their base for the advance along the Kokoda Track, and made their last stand in January 1943. But as Giruwa, near Sanananda, was the command, administrative and supply centre of the Japanese base, it has been used instead when referring to the base in general.

‘Nankai Shitai’ (South Seas Detachment) has been used to include all IJA and IJN forces in the Giruwa–Owen Stanley Range area. Strictly speaking, the air flotilla and a number of small IJN units were not under army command, so were not part of the Nankai Shitai.

After the war for official purposes the fighting in Papua 1942–43 was divided into three parts: the battles of Kokoda, Buna–Gona and Milne Bay. This book concerns the Battle of Kokoda, but the term ‘Kokoda campaign’ has been used instead.

The six Japanese infantry battalions in the Nankai Shitai were in two regiments, the 144th and 41st. The battalions were numbered 1/144th, 2/144th, 3/144th, 1/41st, 2/41st and 3/41st. Other infantry battalions in the text with a prefix 2/ are Second Australian Imperial Force battalions. Other Australian infantry battalions without the prefix 2/ are militia battalions.
Glossary

AAF  Allied Air Force
adj  adjutant
AIF  Australian Imperial Force
AJRP  Australia–Japan Research Project
AMF  Australian Military Force
ANGAU  Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit
ATIS  Allied Translator and Interpreter Service
AWM  Australian War Memorial
BCC  bridge construction company
Bde  brigade
Bn  battalion
BnHQ  battalion headquarters
butai  Japanese military unit
C in C  commander in chief
CIB  Commonwealth Investigation Branch
Coy  company
daitai  Japanese battalion-size unit
DCC  division cavalry company
DNI  Director of Naval Intelligence
ER  engineer regiment
FAAAB  field anti-aircraft artillery battalion
go  unit of measurement for rice; 1840 grams
HMG  heavy machine-gun
IER  independent engineer regiment
IGS  Imperial General Staff
IHQ  Imperial Headquarters
IJA  Imperial Japanese Army
IJAHQ  Imperial Japanese Army Headquarters
IJN  Imperial Japanese Navy
IJNHQ  Imperial Japanese Navy Headquarters
IMTB  independent motor transport battalion