

PATHFINDER



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THE AIR CAMPAIGN OVER THE KOKODA TRAIL

Kokoda has been called Australia's most significant campaign of World War II. Although plans for an actual invasion of Australia had already been abandoned before operations got underway, the Japanese advance towards Port Moresby brought them closer to Australia than in any other phase of the war. Support and supply from the air was an indispensable factor in the success of the Allies in defeating that campaign.

On 21 July 1942 Japanese troops came ashore near Gona on the north coast of Papua and began moving inland, thrusting southwards. Opposing them was a single infantry brigade of Australian militia, poorly trained, poorly equipped and ill prepared. A week later, the 39th Battalion was forced to withdraw from Kokoda and its important airfield. The order for Japanese forces to attack Moresby over the Owen Stanley ranges was postponed until later in August, when the advance was to be coordinated with a landing at Milne Bay on the south-eastern tip of Papua. Allied air power helped to win the battle for Milne Bay, the enemy's first defeat on land, which proved to be another decisive factor in the New Guinea campaign.

In September, with the Japanese just 30 kilometres from Moresby, the RAAF's 30 Squadron employed its new Beaufighters to begin attacking the enemy's supply and communication lines along the trail from Buna to Kokoda. Under US Fifth Air Force control, the squadron quickly proved the Beaufighter (dubbed *Whispering Death* by the Japanese) to be one of the RAAF's most potent weapons.

At this time, thanks to improvements in the supply line, the tactical situation swung in favour of the Australians. Supplies were now being trucked most of the way forward to the Australian artillery at Ower's Corner on the southern end of the trail, which was within firing range of enemy forces. The Japanese, on the other hand, had to carry their supplies all the way from the north coast, coping with attacks on strategic bottlenecks along the route by US General Kenney's air forces. Aircraft ranging from RAAF Kittyhawks to USAAF Flying Fortresses eventually destroyed the important Wairopi ('wire rope') bridge over the Kumusi River below Kokoda.

Supplying the troops was the key to Allied success, but the supplies were at times inadequate. 'For the moment air supply is paramount,' wrote Australia's General Blamey to US General MacArthur on 5 October. The gravity of the situation was highlighted in a report from Major-General A.S. Allen, commanding the 7th Division, two days later:



'Biscuit bomber' - a USAAF C-47 Dakota dropping supplies

Unless supply etc. dropping of 50,000 pounds [23 tonnes] daily, plus additional to build up reserve is assured, complete revision of plans will have to be made and large proportion of troops withdrawn to Imita Ridge position. Any attempt then to hold a determined enemy advance ... and to occupy Kokoda will be jeopardised beyond all reason.

The logistics of getting adequate supplies, with limited available aircraft, to the hard-pressed troops crossing the Owen Stanleys was prodigious. In September, the air support force under Kenney's command could only muster some 26 dedicated transport aircraft (primarily USAAF, as RAAF Douglas Dakotas would not come into service until the following February). These had to be supplemented with bombers such as Mitchells, which were then unavailable for their primary task. The weather rarely cooperated, and flying over mountainous terrain in cloud was fraught with danger.

To compound the problem, airdropping was a difficult art that had not yet been perfected. Official historian Douglas Gillison describes the method in *The Royal Australian Air Force 1939-1942* in the following terms:

Parachutes were limited in number and were reserved for ammunition, medical supplies and other fragile goods; the rest were wrapped in blankets which were bound by wire and tossed free from the aircraft ... Damage to ammunition so dropped created a special problem; the troops sometimes found it faulty, with serious results.

During October and November the Allied advance north was assisted when the airfields at Myola and Kokoda were secured, allowing the first Dakota with rations and medical supplies to land at Kokoda on 5 November. The use of native carriers for resupply and evacuation of casualties along the route, however, remained crucial. In mid-December an unusual force bolstered the available transport aircraft: 15 Hudson bombers from the RAAF training unit at Bairnsdale, Victoria, which were moved to Port Moresby to form the bulk of the Special Transport Flight. For a month they made the hazardous run over the Owen Stanleys to deliver stores for the troops.



A Wirraway of 4 Squadron at Wau, New Guinea

Also, in November, 4 Squadron RAAF arrived at Moresby in support of the 7th Division and the US 32nd Division. Its Wirraways were able to use their slow speed to advantage in the reconnaissance role. On one of the first missions, the crew of a Wirraway that crash-landed at Wairopi managed to make their way through the jungle to Kokoda.

The squadron flew weather reconnaissance missions over the Kokoda Gap in the Owen Stanleys, which allowed

a lower and safer air route into Kokoda. It also carried out tactical reconnaissance of enemy troop movements, photography, message dropping, and even strafing and dive-bombing. Artillery spotting from just 1000 feet over enemy positions was particularly hazardous.



Hudson of Special Transport Flight loading at Wards Strip, Port Moresby

Reconnaissance over New Guinea was difficult, the dense jungle often being almost impenetrable even from treetop height. Often the only way to identify the position of enemy guns was to attract fire from them! Over the north coast, the Wirraways flew low enough to make out fresh tracks along the beaches. They also dropped supplies to troops in the field (although this had the disadvantage of giving away their position).

By mid-November, the reinforced Australian forces had pushed on past the Kumusi River and reached the north coast. The battle for the Kokoda Trail was over, although Japanese units continued to resist strongly in the extremely difficult coastal terrain around Buna, Gona and Sanananda until mid-January 1943. Air power had helped ensure that the iconic Kokoda campaign ended in the Allies' favour.

Against the suffering and heroism on the Kokoda Trail the arguments between generals and politicians might seem of little consequence. But the opposite is the case. It was errors by men like MacArthur and Blamey which led to the near disaster in New Guinea. As usual, it was the men in the front line who paid the heaviest price.

- Professor David Horner, 2002
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