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Australian History Scholarship

Kokoda in World War II - Perspective study

What was it like for Japanese soldiers to fight the Australians?

David Ardley

Henry Kendall High School, Gosford

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The Australian Department of Veterans’ Affairs highlight the Papua New Guinea Campaigns 1942-45 of World War II (WWII) as “critical to victory in the Pacific War against the Japanese” noting the loss of “more than 8,000 Australians.” (Department of Veterans’ Affairs 2012) “The Kokoda Track[[1]](#footnote-1) stands as an icon for Australian participation in the Second World War” (2012: Department of Veteran Affairs, 12) Of the WWII battles in New Guinea, The Kokoda Campaign and the conflict over the northern beaches were significant theatres of war that Australians and Japanese share as common history.

Having received the 2011 Premier's Commonwealth Bank Foundation Australian History Scholarship I undertook a perspective study, researching what it was like for Japanese forces to fight against Australian soldiers in the Kokoda Campaign and at the northern beaches of New Guinea during WWII (Kokoda and the northern beaches).

My research included:

* + A literature review of recent accounts of Japanese perspectives of the New Guinea Campaign;
  + Experiencing firsthand conditions in New Guinea by walking the Kokoda Track from Owers’ Corner to Kokoda and travelling to the northern beaches;
  + Meeting with Japanese veterans and families to hear their perspectives firsthand;
  + Visiting museums and shrines in Japan commemorating Japanese involvement in WWII;
  + Research at the Australian War Memorial; and
  + Recording my experiences and discoveries to share in teaching materials.

This report mirrors my itinerary and highlights significant insights gained.

New Guinea - The Kokoda Track and Northern Beaches

Integral to understanding the Japanese perspective was experiencing the environment in which the conflict took place. Many people commemorating the past by walking the Kokoda Track only travel between Owers’ Corner and Kokoda. I extended my journey to include the northern beaches to fully appreciate Collie and Marutani’s telling of the story of the Japanese “path of infinite sorrow”. (Collie & Marutani 2009)

I was guided by Frank Taylor of[Kokoda Treks & Tours](http://www.kokoda.com.au/). Frank’s respect for and knowledge of the battlefields and the history of both Australia and Japan that he shared with us was insightful.

A plaque greets walkers at Owers’ Corner with battle details and causality lists. From this I learned there was significantly greater loss of life at the northern beaches than along the Track itself. This reinforced to me that for my students’ comprehensive learning of this topic I need to ensure I teach the broader aspects of the entire campaign and not solely focus on the well-recognised Kokoda Track.

It was immediately evident the rugged terrain and extreme climatic conditions described in the accounts I have read were not exaggerated. Harsh conditions necessitated a guide and a contingent of 20 carriers to support our group of twelve to safely traverse the Kokoda Track. I can now clearly see how the environment brought tremendous challenges to those who fought and struggled to survive. While I can never really know exactly what it was like fighting there 70 years ago, experiencing these conditions brought me new understanding of the incredible endurance of those unfortunate to have been in this conflict.

Just two days walk from Owers’ Corner I witnessed locations and remnants of defensive positions held by Australian soldiers at Imita Ridge in September 1942. On the summit of Imita Ridge Frank Taylor[[2]](#footnote-2) highlighted the strategic significance of this location to the outcome of this campaign. For the Australians this ridge was a last line of defence to be held at all cost if Port Moresby was not to be taken by the Japanese. (Taylor 2012 pers. comm., James 2008, pp.182-183; Harm 2005, pp. 256-257, Brune 2004, pp. 239-240) What the Australian command did not realise at the time was Japanese troops had been ordered to return to their strongholds on the northern beaches. In the classroom we can view this situation from the Japanese perspective to consider the likely outcome had the Japanese been ordered to advance instead of withdraw.

A mere 9 hours walk to the north of Imita Ridge, is Ioribaiwa, the southernmost extent of the Japanese advance. This revealed to me just how close the Japanese came to achieving their goal of taking Port Moresby! Through my literature review I learned this was the location the Japanese had reached when their High Command realised they didn’t have capacity to continue to reinforce and resupply their forces so ordered them to advance to the rear and secure their positions on the northern beaches. (Collie & Marutani 2009, pp. 139-142; James 2008, pp.196-198; Harm 2005, pp. 255-256) Had this decision not been made when it was the outcome of this campaign may well be a different history. I can now bring to life so much better in my teaching my greatly improved understanding of this critical turning point.

I carried with me a copy of Hajime Marutani and Craig Collie’s book *“The Path of Infinite Sorrow - The Japanese on the Kokoda Track”*. This reference is an invaluable resource on the Japanese perspective and I will use it in my further teaching of this subject. At Ioribaiwa I read their account of the Japanese who had fought so hard and lost so many of their fellow soldiers to reach this position, only to be ordered to “advance to the rear”. The level of detail presented and the inclusion of many personal accounts of Japanese soldiers brought to life for me the perspective of those who were fighting against the Australian soldiers. Being so impressed with the credibility of this research I contacted the authors to assist me with conducting my research in Japan.

Our visits too many battlefields during our trek reinforced the incredible loss of Australian, Japanese and Papua New Guinean lives. Many locations were battlefields both during the Japanese advance and withdrawal[[3]](#footnote-3). This raised a complexity I had not previously considered; what incredible horror for soldiers on both sides to have to fight over ground where their colleagues’ blood was so recently spilled and their remains were still present.

On our final day on the Kokoda Track we arrived at the Australian war memorial at Isurava, one of the most impressive commemorative sites I have been privileged to visit. From the battlegrounds of South Korea to the Western Front in Europe I have not seen anything as unique and thought provoking in its location and simplicity. The memorial highlights the unyielding qualities of Courage, Endurance, Sacrifice and Mateship displayed by the Australian soldiers. Essential to providing students with a deeper understanding of this conflict is recognition that these qualities also speak loudly of the Japanese soldiers.

Arriving to Kokoda I realised my preconception of Kokoda was wrong. I had visualised a mountain village like Alola or Deniki[[4]](#footnote-4). Kokoda is located on a relatively flat, broad river valley. The extreme heat and humidity of this lower altitude made the last 3km of the track some of the most difficult ground to cover. This reinforced for me how important it is for teachers to be aware of our students’ preconceptions to develop in them enquiring minds willing to challenge their own existing views.

Given more Japanese and Australian soldiers died fighting in such locations as the northern beaches (Gona, Buna and Sanananda), visiting this area was critical to my research. The northern beaches were the site of both the beginning and end of the Japanese attempt to take Port Moresby. The information board at Owers’ Corner notes 22,500 Japanese soldiers landed on the northern reaches. They started with great expectations of success. (Collie & Marutani 2009, pp. 1-4) Just six months later, with a cost of over 12,000 soldiers’ lives, the Japanese were forced to withdraw. Of the original 22,500 only 5,400 departed[[5]](#footnote-5). The information board notes significantly more Japanese soldiers died than the loss of life incurred by Australian and American forces. I note these numbers suggest over 5000 Japanese soldiers are unaccounted for. Discrepancies such as this reinforce that we need to consult a variety of sources to derive a balanced understanding of the historical details we are teaching.

The straight-line distance coast to coast across New Guinea is only approximately 150km. The elevation of the terrain means the distance travelled was much longer. Coupled with the harsh conditions this meant our group took 12 days to travel this distance. The flight back to Port Moresby took just 35 minutes. We did not have the horrific experience of those who fought there for months 70 years ago. However these 12 days gave me a glimpse of many of the challenges soldiers faced.

I was able to follow in the footsteps of Japanese soldiers from Ioribaiwa Ridge to Buna and Gona where so many came to the end of their *path of infinite sorrow****.*** The entire journey was an amazing experience providing a wealth of personal experiences and images to share with students and colleagues as learning resources.

Through Japanese Eyes

With new insights and context I travelled to Japan to learn directly from Japanese WWII veterans and families about their experiences fighting the Australians. I also visited museums and shrines that commemorate Japanese involvement in this part of WWII. It was my honour to be hosted in Japan by Hajime Marutani[[6]](#footnote-6)*.* What I achieved could not have reached such depth and scope without Hajime’s generous contribution. Hajime invested time, shared extensive knowledge of Japanese perspective, introduced me to Japanese veterans, members of the Bereaved Families Association[[7]](#footnote-7) and many other relevant people who graciously shared views, thoughts and experiences. Most were surprised, and all were pleased, to learn I was looking at the Japanese perspective of a conflict that for many in Japan is a forgotten part of their history.

In Tokyo I visited the [Yushukan Museum](https://www.yasukuni.or.jp/english/yushukan/index.html) and Yasukuni Shinto Shrine. I was stunned to not find reference to Australia in The New Guinea Campaign display. In the Japanese perspective presented I could not find mention of Australia as an enemy in WWII anywhere in the Museum or in the English edition of the Museum Guide[[8]](#footnote-8). There was no reference to bombing Darwin or the attack on Sydney as part of the Pacific campaign[[9]](#footnote-9). One exhibit noted the New Guinea Campaign *“tested the limits of human endurance”* for the Japanese soldiers who were involved. (Yasukuni 2009, p. 59)

I visited the former base of the 144th Regiment of the Japanese Imperial Army (“144th”) in Kochi Prefecture, now Kochi University. Hajime told me that many people in the area don’t know the history of this site. This reminded me how easily local history can be lost with the passage of time. Incredibly this site is more historically significant to me than many of the students who attend the university! We must ensure our students do not so easily dismiss our own local history.

Soldiers of the 144th started their military journey at these barracks and ended their lives in jungles and beaches of New Guinea. I followed their footsteps through the main gates of the barracks to Asakura Railway Station where they boarded trains bound for troop ships that would take them to the war.

I met school teachers in Kochi interested in my project and comparing notes on our different teaching styles. They were surprised to find in Australia I am able to consider and share both Australian and Japanese perspectives of WWII history with students. Earlier in 2012 Kochi TV interviewed my students and I for a segment of a documentary *“The Promise of the Bone Man”* telling the story of Kokichi Nishimura. This documentary had aired on local TV in Japan and has since aired nationally. This opportunity enabled students from Henry Kendall High School to be directly involved in a Japanese perspective.

I learned in Japan commemoration of those lost in war has religious association; shrines and temples are the commemorative structures[[10]](#footnote-10). The separation of Church and State within Japanese political structures presents difficulties for government officials to visit commemorative sites. Contrastingly Australian politicians are regularly involved in commemorative activities. In Australia war veterans a have voice in the politics of our nation while this does not appear to be the situation in Japan.

At the Koyasan Temples in central Japan I visited a memorial to Japanese soldiers who died in North Borneo. This memorial included reference to Australian soldiers. Flying side by side were the flags of Japan, Australia and Malaysia. On the same site was a monument to Japanese who were executed for war crimes, very relevant to teaching about “History Wars” with Extension History classes.

By far the most revealing experience was the privilege of speaking directly with WWII veterans (shown below with me) and their families who I was honoured to meet.

I was welcomed to the home of Kokichi Nishimura, Japanese Kokoda veteran, “The Bone Man of Kokoda”. (Happell 2011). Nishimura was a soldier in the 2nd Battalion of the 144th Regiment of the Japanese Imperial Army. His inspirational dedication to the memory of his colleagues led him to devote 26 years to searching the mountains of New Guinea for their remains. (Happell 2011) I spoke with Mr. Nishimura about his experiences including his final days on Ioribaiwa Ridge and memories of fighting the Australians whom he holds in high regard for “fighting spirit”. I asked if he thought the Japanese would have succeeded had they advanced on the Australians at Imita Ridge. His answer required no translation as he shrugged his shoulders and drew a question mark. I believe an order to advance on Imita resulting in his likely death would have been easier for him than the order he was given that forced him to withdraw.

I met Minoru Honda, a Japanese Zero pilot who served over Malaya, New Guinea and Guadalcanal. His ability to survive the war is a clear testimony to his courage and skill as a pilot. Mr. Honda spoke of losing one of his best friends during an Australian air strike; this was personal and at the time he hated the Australians. A similar feeling is often recounted by Australian veterans regarding the loss of their mates, and now I was hearing the same story reflecting the same loss from a Japanese point of view. I have presented Mr. Honda’s story to year 9 students without identifying his background, and had them undertake an empathy task. Students have assumed the subject of the story was Australian. They were extremely surprised when I identified him as a Japanese Zero pilot.

I visitedRyozo Kawate,also from the 144th. He survived not only the New Guinea Campaign but also Guam and Rabaul. He relayed his perception that “the Australians could shoot forever because their clips lasted longer”, reflecting a difference in the resources at the disposal of the opposing forces.

Mrs Yumi Imanishi, daughter of Staff Sergeant Imanishi relayed the following. Mr. Imanishi[[11]](#footnote-11) survived the advance to Ioribaiwa and withdrawal back to the northern beaches. He is particularly remembered for saving many men’s lives by ordering them to discard equipment they couldn’t use but due to their sense of honour and duty would otherwise have carried to their deaths. In 1969 he was in the first Japanese expedition to the New Guinea battlefields to recover Japanese war dead. He was greatly mourned when he passed away in 2007.

With members of the Bereaved Families Association I learned of their sense of loss relating to the still missing remains of thousands of Japanese soldiers. To them I said *“I have seen many things over the course of my journey in New Guinea and Japan. What I have seen the most is not what makes us different but what we have in common. Our shared history in New Guinea was a time of grief and suffering for both nations, not only on the battlefields but also in the homes of the soldiers’ families. Families on all sides of a conflict need closure so that they can move forward with their lives.”*

In Japan I collected stories, images and memories to assist in expanding students understanding of our shared history with Japan.

The View At Home

I visited the Australian War Memorial looking at how The Kokoda Campaign is presented. I visited Old Parliament House and reviewed my research notes in the very rooms our government of the day dealt with Australia’s wartime involvement.

Steven Bullard[[12]](#footnote-12), of the Australian War Memorial, co-edited “From a hostile shore – Australia and Japan at war in New Guinea”. I found this resource very useful when researching the Australian perspective of the Japanese forces. (Bullard & Keiko 2004) Steven supported my research, and shared contacts for the Japanese perspective. He told me he believes “It’s important to balance our accounts of these battles with the intentions and experiences of former enemies.”

I gained access to AWM 55 6/1, a file containing summary reports of interrogations of some captured Japanese soldiers. These records are quite extensive and excellent as stimulus for empathy tasks with year 9 students. Studying experiences of Australian soldiers my students reviewed the interrogation record of Tomoichi Ikedo who was captured at Buna 10 December 1942. Students considered what it was like to fight against Australians through the eyes of 1st Class Private Tomoichi Ikedo, soldier of the Imperial South Seas Forces of Japan.

Outcomes

My expectations of this scholarship have been surpassed. The Japanese perspective of the Kokoda Campaign of WWII has become personal to me; no longer simply words/pictures in a book/TV documentary.

Perspective provides an engaging way to inspire students to learn about the experiences of Australian and Japanese soldiers without looking at them solely as enemies and understanding that Japanese soldiers were obligated to fight against the Australians. They too had families who worried about them and for thousands have families who can never properly mourn them because their remains still lie in the battlefields.

Learning of my scholarship, Australian Kokoda veteran Reverend Roy Wotton contacted me. Roy expressed support for my project and also concern that some people may not like me teaching the Japanese perspective. Despite personally burying many Australian soldiers, Roy considers that the Japanese perspective needs to be shared with Australian students. This scholarship led to me meeting Roy whose Kokoda experience I can now share with students.

I am transcribing my research to create a resource CD supporting teaching of Kokoda[[13]](#footnote-13) incorporating aspects of historiography and perspective[[14]](#footnote-14).[[15]](#footnote-15) I am keen to share this with other History teachers and am happy to be contacted for this purpose.

Paul Kiem, of the History Teachers’ Association of NSW, has expressed interest in this project. I will liaise with Paul regarding opportunities to share my research through the History Teachers Association network.

Many times in the mountains and swamps of New Guinea I wished for a way to bring my students to the places where so many soldiers fought in what is a shared history between Australia and Japan. This scholarship has afforded me professional development that will facilitate me teaching about The Kokoda Campaign in a much more engaging way for my students and invaluable resources to share with colleagues across the State.

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1. Depending on the source - Kokoda Track and Kokoda Trail are used interchangeably. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Imita Ridge 4/6/2012 - Site briefing by Frank Taylor, Guide, Kokoda Treks and Tours Pty. Ltd. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Battlefields such as Brigade Hill and Templeton’s Crossing [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alola and Deniki are mountain villages along the Kokoda Track [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (2000 evacuated by sea and 3,400 by land) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hajime is co-author with Craig Collie of the book The Path of Infinite Sorrow, The Japanese on the Kokoda Track, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Japan South Seas World War 2 Force Bereaved Families Association [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yasukuni, Jinja 2009 Record in pictures of Yūshūkan, Yasukuni Shrine, Tokyo [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Pacific Campaign recognised by Australians, is referred to as The Greater East Asia War Campaigns in Japanese records. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In Australia we commemorate our participation in conflicts in war memorials rather than in places of religious worship. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. now deceased [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. of the Australia-Japan Research Project at the Australian War Memorial [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. NSW Stage 5 History syllabus [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Seeing the Australian soldier through the eyes of a different culture [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Due for completion Term 2, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)