

## 2.8 Australians in the Pacific War: Kokoda

In early 1942 Japan's advances in the Pacific seemed unstoppable. Australia lacked the ships and planes to prevent a Japanese landing on the north or west of the Australian mainland. If that happened, a 'scorched earth' policy was to be adopted. In fact, by March the Japanese had insufficient ships and troops to invade Australia. However, their fortress at Rabaul was crucial for their Pacific operations and they wanted to occupy Papua and New Guinea to strengthen their hold on it. A Japanese invasion force was sent to take Port Moresby, in Papua. But between July and November 1942 Australian troops repelled them on the Kokoda Track.

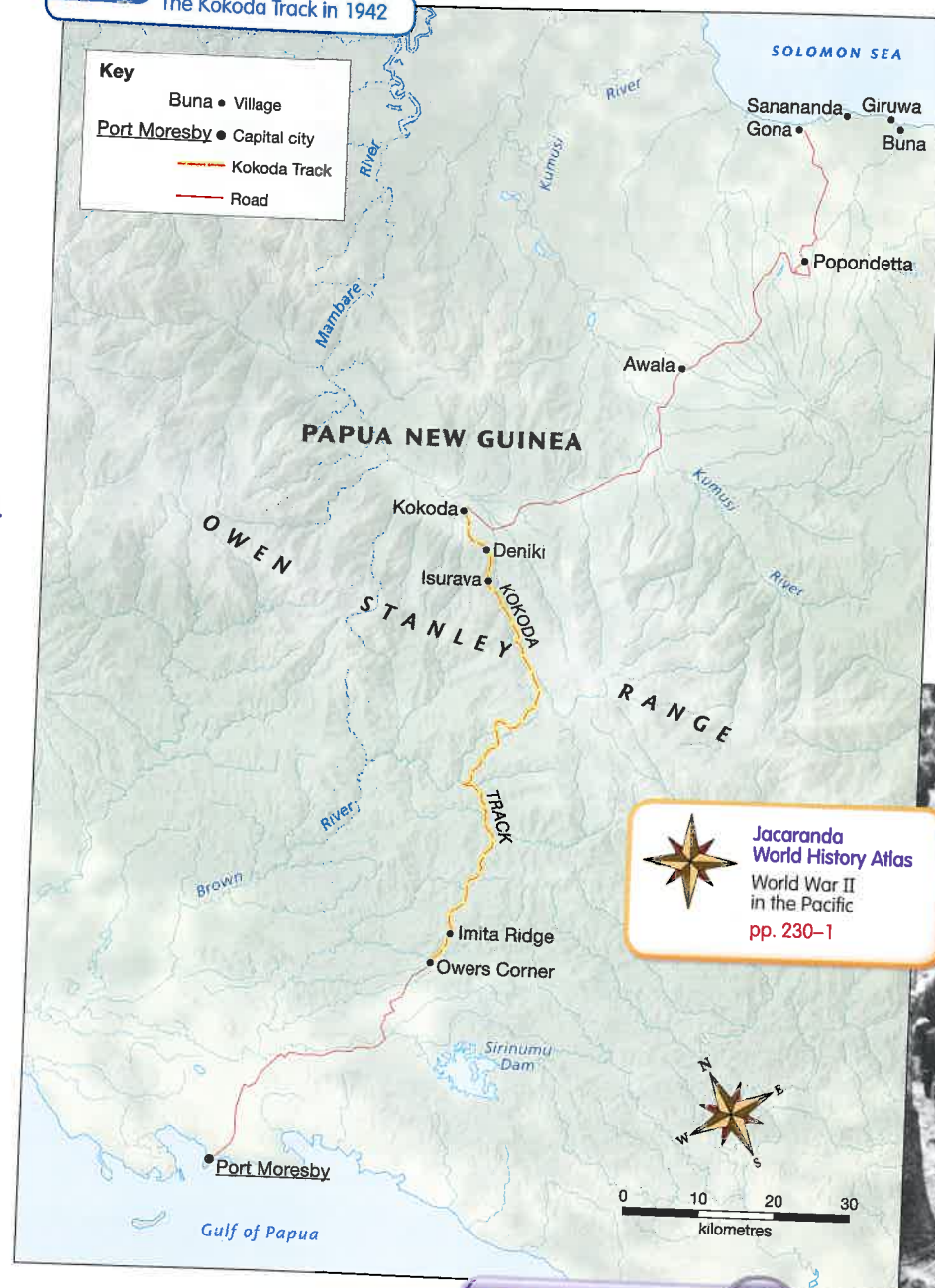
### The Kokoda Track

With the AIF 6th and 7th Divisions not yet available, the 8th Division in captivity and the 9th Division in the Middle East, the only Australian troops standing in the way of a Japanese invasion of Papua were three militia battalions stationed in Port Moresby. The Kokoda Track was a steep and muddy trail that wound from Port Moresby through the dense jungle, across the rivers and over the mountains of the rugged Owen Stanley Range (see Source 1). In June 1942 militiamen of the 39th Battalion were ordered to advance with troops of the Papuan Infantry Brigade (PIB) along this track to stop any Japanese advance towards Port Moresby from Papua's north coast.

Japan's attempt to take Port Moresby by sea had already been prevented by the Battle of the Coral Sea in May (see spread 2.5). So the

Japanese planned to capture it by two land attacks. The first was to be across the Kokoda Track; the second was to follow a landing at Milne Bay. For their Kokoda advance, almost 6000 Japanese troops were landed near Gona on Papua's north coast on 19 July.

Source 1 The Kokoda Track in 1942



Jacaranda  
World History Atlas  
World War II  
in the Pacific  
pp. 230–1

### Did you know?

The Kokoda campaign is sometimes called the 'Battle for Australia'. Had the Japanese captured Port Moresby, they would have been able to dominate the Coral Sea and bomb Queensland.

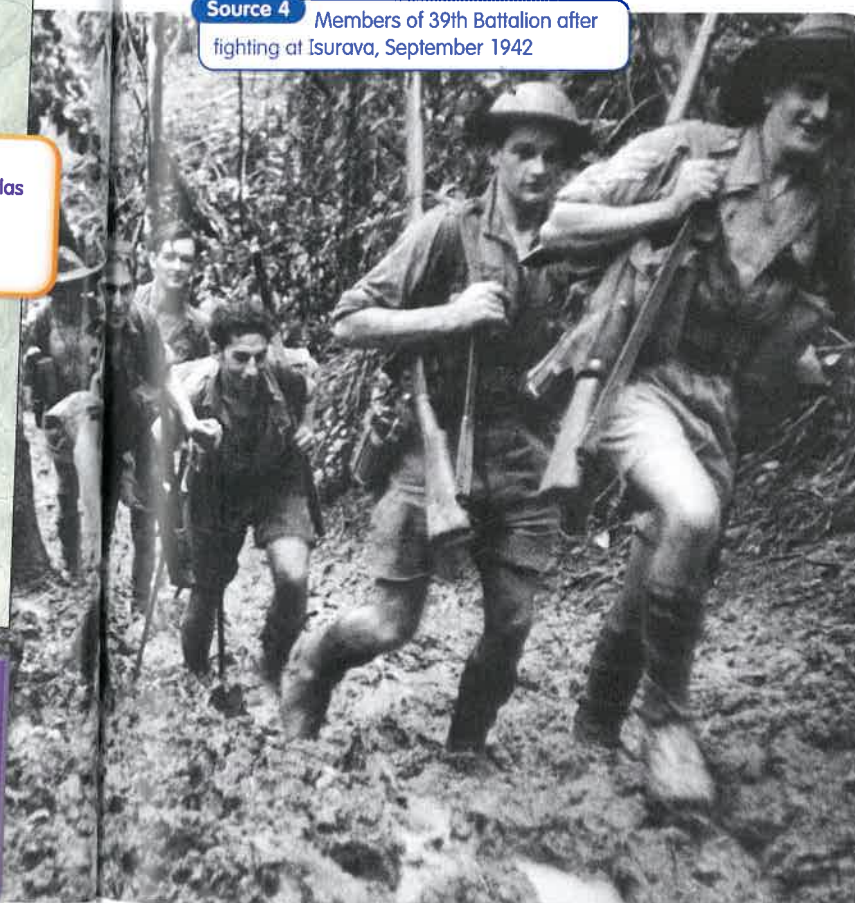
Source 2 An account of Japanese tactics in the Kokoda campaign

[Japanese] tactics appeared to follow a definite pattern. A mobile spearhead advanced rapidly ... While the spearhead deployed and engaged the opposition, support troops would site a machine-gun ... Feint or deliberate attacks disclosed the width and strength of the defensive positions by drawing the enemy's fire ... The stronger support elements, coming forward, cut their way round their opponents' flanks, either to force a withdrawal or to annihilate the defenders in a surprise attack from the rear.

Source 3 From the war diary of the 39th Battalion for 29 July 1942

ENEMY were reported to be advancing on our posns [positions] from the NORTH. Lt. Col. OWEN ... was hit just above the right eye by a sniper ... By this time (0320 hrs) the ENEMY were firing from our rear and closing in on the flanks ... Our line then broke completely and orders were given for a hasty withdrawal ... Our tps [troops] retired to DENEKI where they again took up defensive posns. They were very tired and morale was low.

Source 4 Members of 39th Battalion after fighting at Isurava, September 1942



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### The Kokoda battles

The men of the 39th Battalion were mostly 18- and 19-year-old Victorian conscripts. They were barely trained, under-equipped, poorly supplied and vastly outnumbered. They reached Kokoda village on 15 July and on 23 July they first clashed with the Japanese at Awala. The Australians and Papuans were forced back to Kokoda village and then further back to Deniki. After more than two weeks of attacks and counterattacks, the defenders were carrying out a fighting retreat. On 14 August they fell back to Isurava.

It was not until late August that reinforcements from the 53rd Battalion of militia and the 7th Division AIF began to reach them. But even with these reinforcements, the Australians were forced back to Imita Ridge, just 50 kilometres from Port Moresby, on 17 September. They were ordered to hold that position at any cost. On 24 September lack of supplies forced the Japanese to withdraw in a fighting retreat. The tide of the battle had turned. On 2 November the Australians regained Kokoda. During the campaign, 607 Australian troops lost their lives and 1015 were wounded. There is no accurate record of the numbers of Papuans who gave their lives in this crucial campaign.

### Activities

Student workbook  
2.3

#### EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 1 Why and how did the Japanese aim to capture Port Moresby?
- 2 Why did Australia consider Port Moresby to be vital for the defence of Australia?
- 3 Which Australian and Papuan troops held the Japanese back on the Kokoda Track until reinforcements arrived?
- 4 Explain why the Kokoda Track was an important turning point in the war for Australia.

#### ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

- 5 What conclusions can you draw from Sources 2 and 3 about Japanese tactics and the difficulties of countering them?
- 6 Using all sources in this spread as your evidence, describe the hardships of the Kokoda campaign.

#### PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

- 7 Hold a class discussion on whether the Kokoda campaign should rank alongside Gallipoli in Australian military history.
- 8 The militia was popularly regarded as inferior to the AIF. How would its achievements on the Kokoda Track have changed that view?

'scorched earth' military strategy of destroying or removing everything that could be used by an advancing enemy