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The Battles for Kokoda Plateau

David W Cameron

Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2020

Reviewed by Kate Tollenaar

The Australian experience in the Second World War features many myths, and in the last 20 years, Kokoda has grown in significance in Australian popular cultural memory. The story of the battle to hold the Kokoda Plateau has been the focus of many recent works, with over nine books published since 2000 and many articles debating the place of Kokoda in Australia’s military history and remembrance. The movie Kokoda was released in 2006, introducing the story to a new generation. Many Australians walk the Kokoda Track each year and this experience is often framed in the language of pilgrimage.

David W Cameron’s The Battles for Kokoda Plateau is a contribution to the field that focuses on individual truth and much of the account is drawn from letters and diaries. After capturing Singapore in early 1942, Japanese forces landed at Papua New Guinea in July 1942, not to establish a base from which to invading Australia as was thought at the time but with the intent to isolate Australia and New Zealand from the United States. The Japanese intended to capture Kokoda and the airstrip and then advance overland to capture Port Moresby. Over the next five months, Japanese forces advanced along the Kokoda Track, fighting Australian and Papuan forces, until they were defeated at Oivi-Gorari in November 1942.

The Battles for Kokoda Plateau, however, recounts the events of three weeks of the battle between July and August 1942, when the 39th Battalion, supported by 1st Papuan Infantry Battalion and Royal Papuan Constabulary fought the Japanese I/144th Battalion. These events are divided chronologically into five chapters: Preparation, Invasion, the First and Second Battles for Kokoda and Lines of Escape. This detailed account illuminates one part of the theatre which General Sir Thomas Blamey and General Douglas Macarthur oversaw.

The Battles follows the same approach of drawing on unpublished first-hand accounts focused on particular timeframe that Cameron’s has used in some of his previous works such as on the battle for Lone Pine at Gallipoli in the First World War and
the Battle of Long Tan in the Vietnam War. This allows for a deep dive into the actions and reactions of individuals that were part of these events.

The reader follows the experience of several commanders, senior non-commissioned officers, a medical officer, an American airman and Australian missionaries who move along the Kokoda Track. The narrative weighs heavily on several narrators, but this does not detract from a sense of the broader experience. Relying on individual letters written during the period, or recollections afterwards, the account bring a sense of immediacy to their experience. Wanting to know what happens to these people compels the reader to read on.

David Cameron writes about the human experience of war, which makes this account easy to read without the need to decipher dense tactical details or force dispositions. Cameron focuses on the experience of these men and women in arduous conditions, battling the infamous terrain over the Owen Stanley Ranges, which all believed impassable, in difficult weather and coping with disease, including dysentery and cholera, and critical shortages of ammunition and food.

The author also writes with empathy for the families of the deployed personnel who waited for years to learn what had happened to their loved ones. This approach makes The Battles a deeper and broader account, encompassing social as well as strictly military history. Part of this social history approach is the addition of brief but absorbing recollections of some veterans who reflect on their experience at Kokoda over 30 years later. These examples demonstrate the often pervasive nature of wartime service and the way that memories can change over time, as well as influence collective memory and myth.

An important part of the mythology of Kokoda has been that the Australians were fighting against tremendous odds, vastly outnumbered by the Japanese. Some accounts claim it was up to ten to one at the first Battle of Kokoda and in The Battles Cameron asserts the Australians were outnumbered by at least three to one. However, this number has been contested by a number of historians. For example, Peter Williams in The Kokoda Campaigns 1942: Myth and Reality debunks eight common myths about Kokoda including the myth that the Australians were constantly outnumbered by Japanese.¹ It is true that during skirmishes in July, Japanese forces were superior but it seems likely this was not significantly more than one to one, certainly less than two to one. The size of Japanese

forces at Kokoda remains contested in historical and popular accounts.

Cameron is an experienced historian, and this is a strong historical work. One of its particular strengths is the inclusion of letters and diary entries from Japanese soldiers and officers, which provide additional insights into the Japanese experience of Kokoda. There are also several interesting facts in the book from Cameron’s research which would warrant additional research for a reader wanting to know more. These facts include the misinformation provided to the Australian public from Headquarters about what was occurring at Kokoda, the press-ganging of 100 Sydney men to enlist and make up the numbers of a Darwin battalion, and accounts of mistreatment and exploitation of the local carriers who assisted the men of the 39th Battalion to carry supplies over the Owen Stanley Ranges during the three-week period.

The tone of the book is imbued by the many accounts of violence by Japanese forces towards civilians and military personnel. These depictions are graphic and include Japanese forces’ executions of Australian prisoners, missionaries and local civilians by gunshot and bayonet. Some of the executions were botched, or deliberately cruel, exacerbating the trauma for the victims and witnesses. Although true and important, these parts of the book make for difficult reading. The first chapter opens with these events, which sets the tone for a sombre and occasionally grisly read. There are some moments of humour; however, overall the account is evocative and challenging.

Readers wanting to know more about this time period will find excellent source material in *The Battles*, and some companion reading, such as the Williams account mentioned earlier, would help more fully explore the Kokoda experience.

*The Battles* meets its intent to honour voices of the men and women who fought in July and August 1942 at Kokoda. Their bravery and fortitude is clear. This book is a worthwhile read for those interested in the individual experience of war in Papua New Guinea during the Second World War.