

The Kokoda Commanders

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The Australian Army's campaign in the Owen Stanley Range in Papua between July and November 1942 was won by the skill, determination and endurance of the ordinary soldiers. An important ingredient was leadership at all levels: commanders of sections, platoons, companies and battalions led by example in desperate situations. But the brigade and divisional commanders should not be overlooked. It was they who decided which troops should be deployed and where the battles should take place.

They were also responsible for employing the supporting artillery, engineering and air resources, and for providing the food, ammunition and medical support. And of crucial importance, they were the link between the Commander of New Guinea Force in Port Moresby and the units fighting along the Kokoda Trail. Simple orders prepared in the tented comfort of Port Moresby looked much different to the senior commanders in the mountains who could see the problems faced by their men. It was their task to interpret and execute these orders.

The senior commanders on the Kokoda Trail laboured under particular difficulties. The Allied commander-in-chief, *General Douglas MacArthur*, and the commander of the Allied land forces, *General Sir Thomas Blamey*, in Brisbane, did not understand the terrain in the Owen Stanley Range, and they underestimated the strength of the Japanese and their determination to push over the range to Port Moresby. As a result, logistic support was lacking. The deployment of additional troops depended on adequate logistic support, which was provided by native porters and could not be increased quickly.

Furthermore, communications between the senior commanders on the Kokoda Trail and Port Moresby were difficult. Radio communications were haphazard, and the alternative was the telephone via an uncertain cable that wound its way precariously along the sides of mountains and across turbulent streams. With no airstrips in the mountains (until very late in the campaign) successive commanders of New Guinea Force could not visit their forward

operational commanders unless they committed themselves to many days of marching. None of them ever did so, and thus never fully appreciated the problems of operating in the mountains.

There were six senior commanders on the Kokoda Trail - Major Generals Allen and Vasey, and Brigadiers Porter, Potts, Eather and Lloyd - and their achievements are worth considering. *Brigadier Selwyn Porter* was the first senior commander deployed into the mountains. A militia officer (in civilian life a bank official), Porter had commanded the 2/6th Battalion in the Libyan campaign and the 2/31st Battalion in the Syrian campaign. When he arrived, aged 37, in Port Moresby in April 1942 to command the 30th Brigade he was disturbed by the poor standard of the brigade's militia battalions and immediately sought officers and NCO's from Australian Imperial Force (AIF) units that had fought in the Middle East.

The 39th Battalion (from the 30th Brigade) began deploying over the Owen Stanley Range in June. It met the brunt of the Japanese landing on 22 July and was driven out of Kokoda on 9 August. Porter sought permission from the Commander New Guinea Force, *Major General Basil Morris*, to move into the mountains to command the force there, known as Maroubra Force, but it was not until 12 August that he left Port Moresby with the 53rd Battalion and his headquarters staff. Arriving at Isurava on 18 August, he began deploying his force - numbering about 600 personnel - to meet an expected Japanese attack. He reported that the supply situation was unsatisfactory.

Meanwhile, *Lieutenant General Sydney Rowell* had arrived in Port Moresby to succeed Morris as Commander New Guinea Force. Soon after, *Major General Arthur (Tubby) Allen*, commander of the experienced 7th Australian Division, had arrived with the first elements of his division, namely the 21st Brigade, commanded by *Brigadier Arnold Potts*. Rowell gave Allen responsibility for operations in the Owen Stanleys, and Allen promptly ordered Potts and his brigade to recapture Kokoda. Once he arrived in the mountains Potts would take command of Maroubra Force, which would then consist of the 39th and 53rd Battalions and his own brigade. Porter would return to Port Moresby, investigating logistic arrangements on the way.

Potts, a Western Australian farmer, was just short of his 46th birthday. Wounded in the First World War, he had been a major in the Syrian campaign and had assumed command of the 21st Brigade in April 1942. He was a brave and inspiring soldier, who understood infantry fighting but had little experience of higher level operations. He took command of Maroubra Force at Isurava on 24 August, but only one battalion of his brigade had arrived before the Japanese began their major offensive on 26 August. In an intense battle the brigade delayed the enemy for four days and inflicted heavy casualties. Potts skillfully stepped his battalions back, fighting successive rearguard actions as they crossed the crest of the ranges. He had to keep manoeuvring his battalions (the two militia battalions had been withdrawn) to ensure that he always prevented the Japanese from bypassing his force, in which case they could have advanced unhindered towards Port Moresby. On 8 September six Japanese battalions attacked the remnants of his brigade south of Efogi. At one stage the attackers were five metres from brigade headquarters, with everyone from Potts to the headquarters cooks involved in the action. He signaled Lieutenant Colonel Albert Caro, commanding officer of the 2/16th Battalion: "Tell Albert C. from Arnold P. If Arnold's bunch is wiped, to take control and go to Number 12 [Menari]." After repelling eight assaults Potts ordered another withdrawal.

Angry with what he thought was Pott's mishandling of his brigade, Rowell ordered Allen to relieve Potts. Allen raised no objection as he felt that judging from the signals; Potts "was either tired or was losing a grip of the situation". Allen did, however, keep an open mind over whether Potts had shown lack of judgment or had been out-fought, and he persuaded Rowell to hear Potts's story. Rowell reinstated Potts to the 21st Brigade when it arrived back in the Port Moresby area. Potts had not failed as a commander and had never lost heart; he retained the confidence of his men throughout.

On 10 September Porter relieved Potts south of Menari. With one of its battalions separated in the withdrawal the 21st Brigade now numbered 300 men, but was being reinforced by the 3rd Battalion (militia). Under enemy pressure, Porter withdrew to Ioribaiwa where he was joined by the first elements of the AIF 25th Brigade. On 14 September *Brigadier Ken Eather*,

commander of the 25th Brigade, took over from Porter. While Porter had commanded twice briefly on the Kokoda Trail, his real contribution was the training of the first two militia battalions that fought there.

Brigadier Eather (aged 41) was a militia officer who had commanded the 2/1st Battalion in the first Libyan campaign in 1941. Rowell had a "lot of faith in Eather", whose battalions were fit, well-trained and experienced. But on 15 September Eather informed Allen that in the face of the enemy's superior strength he had decided to withdraw to Imita Ridge, about 40 kilometres by air from Port Moresby.

Allen ordered him to fight every inch of the way. In his renowned book *Retreat from Kokoda*, Raymond Paull records that Allen said to Eather, "There won't be any withdrawal from the Imita position, Ken. You'll die there if necessary. You understand that?" In an interview in 1974, Eather could not recall these words, although as he said, the telephone line was "weak and spluttering". Rowell told Allen that further withdrawal was out of the question and that "Eather must fight it out at all costs".

In fact, the Japanese were at the end of their tether. Sent forward with the minimum of supplies, for the first time they were under Australian artillery fire. On 18 September, following reverses in the Solomon Islands, the Japanese high command ordered its force on the Kokoda Trail to withdraw to the north coast.

Although the tide had now turned in favour of the Australians, Eather's final withdrawal had far-reaching consequences. General MacArthur had been unfairly criticising the performance of the Australian soldiers in the mountains. He now persuaded the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin, to order General Blamey to New Guinea, where he was to take command. By the time Blamey arrived on 23 September the position had stabilised. When on 28 September the 25th Brigade launched a major counter-attack it found that the Japanese had abandoned their position. But it was too late to save Rowell. On 29 September Blamey relieved him of command - more a result of personal differences than because of any inadequacy in Rowell's command. On 3 October Blamey, MacArthur and Lieutenant General Edmund Herring (who had replaced Rowell) travelled to Owers' Corner at the beginning of the

Kokoda Trail to watch the AIF 16th Brigade begin its trek into the mountains following the 25th Brigade as part of the Australian counter-offensive. With them went the headquarters of the 7th Division. *Major General Allen*, short, heavily built, aged 48, put a pack on his back and headed into the mountains to command the two brigades now being deployed forward.

A militia officer and accountant in civilian life, Allen had commanded a platoon, company, and battalion in the First World War. He had commanded the 16th Brigade in Libya and Greece in early 1941 before taking over the 7th Division in the Syrian campaign. Gavin Long described him thus: "Blunt in speech, honest as the day, choleric yet kindly, completely without affectation or pomposity, he was a leader of a kind that appeals immediately to Australians."

Within days Allen began complaining that he did not have sufficient supplies to deploy his forces fully. His leading brigade, the 25th, was moving cautiously, on limited supplies, meeting fierce Japanese defences in difficult jungle terrain. Allen was determined to avoid unnecessary casualties.

Bypassing the chain of command - Herring was nominally Allen's superior - Blamey asserted that the supplies had been despatched and that Allen was to 'press the enemy with vigour. If you are feeling strain personally relief will be arranged.'" Allen was incensed and replied that he "never felt fitter nor able to think straighter". But MacArthur was pressing for a rapid advance, and Blamey sent further orders urging Allen to move quickly.

At one stage Blamey passed on a message from MacArthur telling Allen to act with "greater boldness" and to employ "wide circling" movements. Allen drafted a curt reply: "If you think you can do any better come up here and bloody try." His chief of staff persuaded him not to send it. He was also dismayed to learn that Potts had again been relieved of command of the 21st Brigade (then reforming near Port Moresby) for his alleged failure in the earlier fighting.

By 20 October the 16th Brigade had taken over the advance and it soon struck a powerful Japanese defensive position around Eora Creek. Brigadier John Lloyd, the brigade commander, had no alternative but to attempt a frontal assault along a narrow gorge. Like the other commanders on the

Kokoda Trail, Lloyd was a citizen soldier with extensive operational experience. After service in the First World War he had spent several years in the British Army in India, before becoming a farmer in Western Australia. He had commanded a battalion during the siege of Tobruk and had gained valuable jungle experience in Ceylon earlier in 1942. As Dudley McCarthy put it, Lloyd was a "genial leader with something of the manner of an English regular officer". Only a month younger than Allen, Lloyd no doubt found the conditions trying, but he kept a close grip on the attack, rotating his suffering battalions to maintain pressure. It was tedious but slowly the brigade gained the ascendancy.

It was too slow for Blamey. On 27 October Blamey informed Allen that Major General Vasey (GOC 6th Division) would relieve him of his command. Vasey was one of the first officers to use a newly opened airstrip in the mountains and he took command on the morning of 29 October. Like Potts, Allen had not failed in command. Few divisional commanders in history have ever been relieved without a visit from their superior officer. No one above the rank of lieutenant-colonel ever visited Allen.

George Vasey was a Duntroon graduate who had served in the First World War. He had been a staff officer in Libya, and had commanded a brigade in Greece and Crete. He was one of the outstanding commanders in the Australian Army, but as the 16th Brigade seized Eora Creek the day before he assumed command, he could not claim credit for that victory. Vasey's orders for the subsequent advance merely implemented the plan that Allen had already discussed with his brigadiers. On 2 November Eather's troops entered Kokoda. Vasey's command of the division in the battle of Oivi, between 9 and 11 November, demonstrated his flair for tactics as he manoeuvred both his brigades to outflank the enemy and win a decisive victory. It was the end of the campaign in the mountains.

Controversy has continued to surround the dismissals during the Kokoda campaign. Sir Sydney Rowell finished his career as Chief of the General Staff. Allen never again commanded in action although he held the important command of the Northern Territory Force until 1945. Blamey recommended

him (unsuccessfully) for a knighthood. Potts commanded a brigade in Bougainville in 1945.

Vasey commanded the 7th Division until he became sick in 1944. He was killed in a plane crash in March 1945 on his way to command the 6th Division. Eather and Porter both commanded brigades successfully in later campaigns. Eather ended the war as a major general. Porter became a major general in the postwar Citizen Military Forces. Lloyd held important instructional appointments, but did not command in action again.