

# Let the warriors of the Kokoda Track march again, on screen

**A** HUGE aerial shot of a jagged mountain range, thrown together by mighty forces ... the jungle, thick and luxuriant, clings even to the sides of near vertical gorges, down which cataracts plunge to join foaming mountain streams ...

(Start main titles)

**KOKODA!** ...

I'd be keen to see this movie. Of course, it has yet to be made. George Friend, an independent producer who got hooked on the Kokoda campaign while making a TV documentary about it three years ago, has a production company (Rising Sun Films), a script in the third rewrite stage and a lot of expressions of interest and approval — by members of the Kokoda Association, a Japanese war veterans' organisation, for instance — but no cheques to cover a projected \$10 million budget.

That is high for an Australian movie. Anything over \$3 million makes investors clench their jaws. Two good recent Pacific war pictures, Bryan Brown's *Blood Oath* and Bruce Beresford's *Paradise Road*, did poor business. Both had prisoner-of-war themes. That road may be too well travelled.

Pacific War films may be the next big thing in cinema, reminding Australians of their heroism of 50 years ago

Generally speaking, however, the Pacific part of World War II is relatively unexplored territory for the movies and its time may be coming.

A Fox 2000-Phoenix picture based on James Jones's novel about the battle of Guadalcanal, *The Thin Red Line*, has been in production near Port Douglas, Queensland, since mid-June. It is said to have a \$65 million budget. Of course, people say all kinds of things in the movie business, but there is an expensive-sounding cast — John Travolta, Sean Penn, Nick Nolte, George Clooney, John Cusack, Woody Harrelson and Bill Pullman. There is also a cult-figure director, Terrence Malick, an American Rhodes scholar and former philosophy professor who made *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*.

Malick is said to have been trying for 10 years to get a movie version of *The Thin Red Line* under way. Also said is that there is another Pacific war movie — a US production, as well — now shooting, although fairly diligent inquiries failed to jog any details loose from industry memories. Anyway, I have no trouble

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believing predictions that Pacific war stories are a coming genre if *The Thin Red Line* clicks.

There are plenty of plots. One of the two or three most gripping action movies I have ever seen is *Nippon no Ichiban Nagai Hi*, which deals with efforts to prevent the Japanese emperor from delivering his surrender speech, in the 24 hours between its recording and its broadcast.

Though movies made for worthy motives are usually, and probably deservedly, shunned by the public, it would be a pity if Australia got left out of any Pacific War boomlet.

Peter Beeh recalled in an article about

the Kokoda track in a recent issue of *Geo* that General Douglas MacArthur, a relentless self-publicist, "censored reporting, making sure Australians remained ignorant of their army's achievements. In a direct reflection of MacArthur's attitude, his chief of staff, Major-General Richard Sutherland, once described the Diggers at Kokoda as 'undisciplined, untrained, over-advertised and useless'."

That is a truly idiosyncratic judgment. Years ago, when I interviewed Lieutenant-General Tsutomu Yoshihara, former chief of staff of Japan's South Seas Army, he said of the Australian infantrymen at Kokoda: "Their qualities of adaptability and individual initiative enabled them to show tremendous ability as fighting men in the jungle. They were superb."

In fact, Yoshihara made unfavourable comparisons of the American troops he confronted in New Guinea with the Kokoda Australians. Being youthfully self-conscious about big-noting the home side, and at the time unaware of MacArthur's PR position and Sutherland's

shameless denigration, I decided not to report this. I have forgotten exactly what the Japanese general said but Yoshihara was at least as blunt as MacArthur's chief of staff.

They certainly were untrained, the thousand children of Depression Australia — average age just over 18 — who were first rushed to New Guinea to hold the line against the advance of some 6000 Japanese troops across the Owen Stanley mountains to Port Moresby, from which an invasion of Australia could be launched.

**T**HE Japanese were thought to be invincible and the young conscripts and their elderly reserve commanders expected only to hold on long enough — at whatever cost in casualties — for experienced soldiers brought back from action in the Middle East to replace them. In fact, the kids' army held the Japanese for almost two months in 1941 before being relieved by the battle-hard AIF, who carried on the ferocious fighting over the terrain described in the pre-title sequence of George Friend's script. The Japanese

suffered their first setback since they captured Singapore.

The 1942 battle of Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, was also pivotal — the first invasion of Japanese-held territory in the relentless push north to Tokyo Bay.

But Kokoda is Australia's epic as no other event, the only battle fought in direct defence of Australian territory.

Friend's script tempers epic somewhat. His movie would interweave flashbacks to Kokoda battles with a contemporary narrative involving a Japanese business tycoon, Takeshi Shimazu, whose helicopter crashes in the Owen Stanleys. An officer during the Kokoda campaign, Shimazu is rescued with his companions — one badly hurt — by Australians, led by Les, a former sergeant, and they set off down the trail along which Shimazu and Les had fought as young men.

Much of the suspense derives from hints that the Japanese and the Australian are somehow linked by a particular battlefield incident that occurred 50 years earlier.

I am not sure what happens as third-draft scripts turn into movies. But a good Kokoda movie would, I think, make Australians feel quite a bit different about themselves.