

Friend in need

DOUGLAS KENNEDY

talks to a Gold Coast independent film producer who is on the trail of funds to film a feature on the World War II Kokoda Campaign in Papua New Guinea

MOVIE investors with \$9.7 million to fuel a new Australian feature will find a mate in the shape of former Australian army officer turned Gold Coast independent producer George Friend.

Friend, who was bitten by the film-making bug producing the 60-minute Australian Army Training Command documentary *Kokoda — The Bloody Track*, is the guiding light behind Rising Sun Films.

The company has several commercial irons in the fire in the form of concepts and treatments, as well as a long-term plan to become a leading player in the Australian movie industry, but one script in its fourth draft is burning hotter than the rest.

Kokoda has become more than a World War II landmark for the former TSS and Miami High schoolboy who rose to the rank of major in the army before undertaking the biggest business campaign of his life.

Friend's approach to making *Kokoda* the feature film is nothing short of a strategy from the likes of Alexander the Great or Napoleon as a keen militaristic sheen shines from the whole proposal.

The film-makers' Benowa home could easily be command headquarters complete with storyboards outlining the whole script from the pen of Victorian scribe John Dixon, who



wrote *Man from Snowy River* and then wrote, directed and produced the TV mini-series *Anzacs*.

Indeed, Friend, who loves to reminisce on former victories such as the battle of the ratings which earned his *Kokoda* — *The Bloody Track* an unprecedented No 2 spot in prime viewing time on Channel 7 on Anzac Day 1992, has his own strategic Cabinet.

The line-up remarkably also includes a one-time confidential aid to former Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, Tota Kondo, who ranks the Gold Coast as paradise on earth since coming to live here nearly a decade ago.

Friend cheerfully boasts that Dix-

on's story — which the writer also plans to direct — will carry the logo "Two sides — One story" and interest in the project is strong among the Japanese.

"There's been interest from Jack Thompson and maybe Guy Pearce if he's available when the shoot gets under way, but just as important is the enthusiasm of Japanese leading actors Rentaro Mikuni and Youki Kudoh," says Friend.

"He's considered something of an Orson Welles in his own country and Youki Kudoh (star of *Heaven's Burning*) is a pop star turned actress like Kylie Minogue or perhaps even bigger.

"The backing for *Kokoda* the movie is just as likely to come from the Japanese as Australian investors as the project has generated a great deal of interest and support there."

The Friend contingent has developed strong ties with Japan as various organisations in both countries have taken a strong financial and cultural interest in the script development.

There have been conferences, meetings and dinners with numerous luminaries and trips to Canberra and Tokyo to lobby and negotiate with political, social and cultural leaders from all walks of life.

Mr Kondo told the *Bulletin* last year that *Kokoda* — The

Bloody Track had far reaching benefits in bringing the two countries closer as it clearly demonstrated the meaningless of war on both sides.

"This was an Australian Army documentary but it did not ridicule the Japanese soldiers, about 7000 of whom lost their lives in the *Kokoda* campaign," he told reporter Drena Parrington.

"It treated them as equally gallant and showed the human aspect from both sides through unbiased eyes."

The *Kokoda* Campaign, which was begun with soldiers from an Australian Battalion as young as 17 and 18, who in 1942 were rushed to New Guinea to hold the front line against 6000 Japanese troops, has become etched into the national consciousness and rated as significant as Gallipoli.

Rising Sun's film, however, takes the *Kokoda* Campaign, which resulted in an Australian victory, as a backdrop to a universal story about two men coming to terms with their past during a contemporary journey of self-discovery.

The story moves fluidly across half a century as Japanese businessman Takeshi Shimazu and tough Australian battler Les Wilson find themselves thrown together in the wilds of the Owen Stanley Ranges.

Dixon's story is told in the form

ABOVE: A Salvation Army chaplain lights a cigarette for a wounded Australian soldier. This is frame enlargement from Australian Damien Parer's film *Kokoda Front Line* shot in Papua New Guinea in 1942.

LEFT: Producer George Friend wants to take up both sides of the *Kokoda* story on film.

Review



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