

Fight for Kokoda film

Don't talk tactics with first-time filmmaker George Friend — he's bound to win. **Sandra McLean** reports

FEW people emerge from the army as filmmakers but then few people have the drive of George Friend.

Also, few have shared his experiences with the Diggers who survived fighting the Kokoda Campaign in New Guinea in World War II. Friend became, well, a friend, to surviving Diggers and Japanese war veterans during the making of the documentary *Kokoda — The Bloody Track*, which was seen on Channel 7 on Anzac Day in 1992.

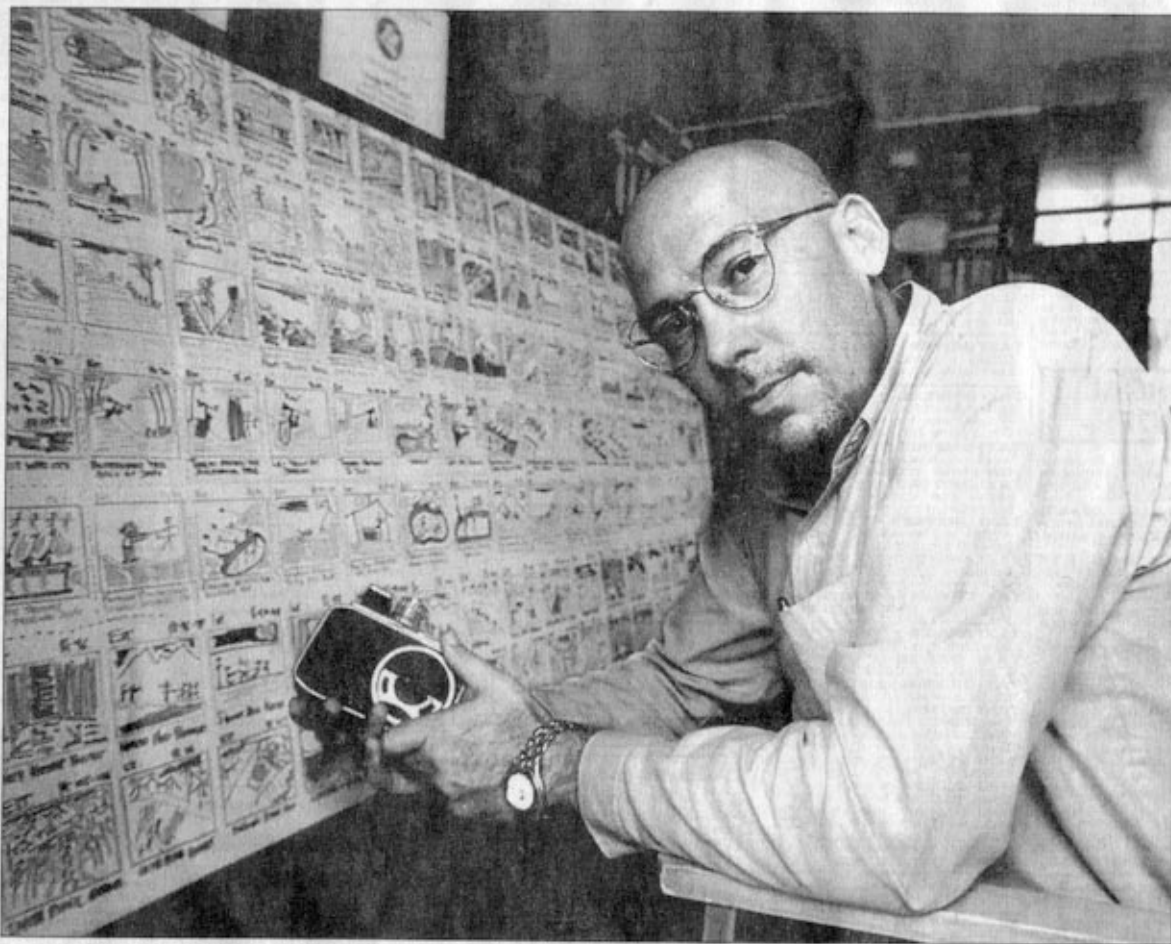
These connections, plus his own gruelling experience walking the Kokoda Trail, have pushed him to go beyond the documentary to make a feature film. Titled *Kokoda*, it uses the bloody campaign in the jungles of New Guinea as a backdrop to a modern-day love story and two men coming to terms with their past.

Japanese businessman Takeshi Shimazu and Aussie battler Les Wilson are thrown together in the Owen Stanley Ranges and while they struggle to reach safety the story returns to the war years. The memories help Shimazu's daughter and Wilson's son understand their fathers.

The energetic Friend, who left the army after a 20-year career, is based on the Gold Coast, where he grew up and shot film on a movie camera he received as a teenager.

The chief executive of Rising Sun Films, he has storyboards erected at his Benowa home and he has built an impressive battle strategy to win friends, influence people and, most importantly, obtain funding.

With the film's budget at \$10 million, he has spent the past few months travelling around Australia and visiting Japan to secure funding. Friend is serious about this project — he has three



GEORGE Friend and his first movie camera . . . first feature film a topic of national interest.

publicists (local, national, international, he explains) and his red sports car has the number plate KOKODA. His army contacts have given him entree to levels of government and diplomacy other first-time filmmakers can only dream of.

Also, he secured John Dixon to write the screenplay for *Kokoda* four years ago and received fund-

ing from the Australian Film Commission to develop the script. The script is in its fourth draft and Friend is certain there will be a fifth. No problem, he says. Two of Japan's leading actors, Rentaro Mikuni and Youki Kudoh (*Heaven's Burning*) recently confirmed their availability for the film and composer Sean O'Boyle is writing the music. Dixon, who

wrote and directed *Anzacs* for TV, will also direct. Friend has been busy meeting politicians such as Senator Bill O'Chee. He has briefed Arts Minister Senator Richard Alston and Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer as well as the deputy Japanese ambassador Mr Akio Suda and defence attache Captain Takahide Yamamoto.

"It's a long process," Friend says of the drive to find funding. "We're building up the reputation of the project at a diplomatic and political level. It is a topic of national interest because of the history and the significance of the Kokoda Campaign."

Friend, in his merchant banker striped shirt and designer shirt studs, looks the very image of a film producer. However, he has had some trouble convincing film funding authorities to hand over money. Voluble and keen, he gets a little tetchy at the suggestion a \$10 million film is an ambitious project for a first-time filmmaker.

"It is my first feature film but I have spent six years putting together a team of people who have done feature projects. Besides, this issue of being a first-time producer I think is a bit of a scam."

"It detracts from the whole issue. I am not a producer. I am a chief executive and this is a business. I am in charge of a \$10 million business. It is a raw nerve. People try to use it against you and fundraising bodies do, too."

Friend, who has an MBA in logistics and transport management from Sydney University, is hoping most of the funding will come from Australia. However, if it comes from overseas, then so be it.

So far, he says, his company has had little success with funding from Film Queensland but the ever-confident Friend has not given up on this avenue of support.

He is almost certain filming will begin in six months and the movie will be ready to be seen in cinemas by 2000.

"There is always money available for good projects," Friend says. "Anyone who has the capacity to write a million-dollar check can come and talk to us."