



on set



jules oughlin shoots feature

KOKODA

New Guinea, 1942. The battle for the track has begun.

A small platoon of Australian soldiers from the 39th Battalion have been set as a forward patrol far outside the perimeter of Isurava, a village on the Kokoda track. After sustained bombardment and the initial attacks from the Japanese, the men are cut off from their supply lines and all communications. Isolated in the jungle behind enemy lines, they must make their way back through the most unforgiving terrain on earth to get to safety and the main body of Australian troops. Allegiances form, strengths and weaknesses emerge, and leadership battles threaten to destroy the group, as the going gets tougher and tougher. After three days with no food or sleep, carrying their wounded, and suffering the effects of dysentery and malaria, they emerge from the jungle exhausted to the point of collapse. But on learning that Isurava is about to fall they pick themselves up and rejoin the battle...

Kokoda is a psychological thriller about a lost patrol of Australian soldiers cut off from their supply line on the Kokoda Trail during the battle for Isurava in New Guinea in 1942. It is a story of survival by a group of untrained, under-equipped men (known as 'chocolate soldiers' so called because it was assumed they would melt in the heat of battle) against an experienced, battle-toughened enemy.

In August of 2005, a day after the feature film *Kokoda* had been green-lit, Director Alister Grierson, Sound Designer Adrian Bilinsky and I boarded a plane for Papua New Guinea. Our goal was to walk the track and absorb as much as we could of the spirit and atmosphere of a place that has become chiselled into the Australian psyche. The excitement, responsibility and fear of the broader objective weighed heavily on us not only because this was to be our first feature project but also because of the gravity and importance of the subject matter. The three of us along with Producer Leesa Kahn, Editor Adrian Rostirolla and Composer John Gray, had graduated from AFTRS only 18 months earlier.

Once we had the script, written by Alister and John Lonie, Alister organized a weekend away for the two of us, along with the Sound Designer, Editor and Composer to watch and discuss films relevant to our project. At this stage of the process war films were of a secondary concern. That weekend was dedicated primarily to the exploration of the grammar of horror, as we wanted to infuse the film with elements of horror and suspense. One of the most important references we used was *Halloween* and its great use of the third-person POV.

"It was an experience I would not have cared to miss, and among the impressions of that exciting night, none stands out more clearly than the weirdness of the natural conditions – the thick white mist dimming the moonlight, the mysterious veiling of trees, the almost complete silence. Thick white streams of vapour stole between the rubber trees, and changed the whole scene into a weird combination of light and shadow". This is the account of Doctor Geoffrey Vernon from *A Bastard of a Place* by Peter Brune.

The process of determining the "look" of the film was very organic and evolved through a number of influences. There was the actual experience of travelling to the Kokoda Track in PNG to observe the colour, the light and the atmospheric conditions within the jungle. The newsreels of Damien Parer, including the Academy Award-winning *Kokoda Frontline*, and the photographs of war photographer George Silk were instrumental for not only myself but also for Production Designer Nick McCallum and Costume Designer Phil Eagles. Part of the opening shot of our film is a homage to Damien Parer and his famous sequence of a wounded Private Johnson being helped by Sergeant Gordon Ayre on the Kokoda Track.

I tracked down a book called *Images of War* that I knew John Toll and Terrence Mallick had referenced on *The Thin Red Line*. It is a collection of paintings and drawings depicting World War II; two paintings in particular were influential. *Jungle Trail* by Alan Barday Barns-Graham would form the basis of my jungle interior look and *The Invasion of Malaya*, by Geoffrey Mainwaring, provided a wonderful reference

for the final battle at Isurava. Peter Brune and Neil McDonald's books about the New Guinea Campaign and Damien Parer's biography provided wonderfully descriptive accounts and impressions of the conditions on the track. The feelings of dread, sickness, excitement and fear were equally as important to me as the descriptions of fog, rain and the play of light in the jungle.

Alister was very open to ideas of how to treat the film from a colour perspective. But there was one thing he was adamant about, Kokoda took place in the Pacific theatre, not the European theatre. It could not look like *Saving Private Ryan* and most WWII films made subsequently that were set in Europe. There was to be no bleach-by-pass and no desaturation. In fact he was keen to explore just the opposite - a heavily saturated palette. While the film had to have a sense of realism, we thought it was also important to inculcate it with an expressionistic style that would go to the heart of what was happening psychologically to the members of our lost patrol. At

times we wanted it to be hyper-real. The light and colour not only had to be representative of the soldiers' state of mind, but also had to give the jungle a menacing presence, almost as if it itself was the enemy.

The colour of the jungle interior during the day was to change from its natural green look to a deep inky blue in a series of peaks and troughs congruent with the storyline. As the suspense and fear built leading to the demise

around a stop over shadow areas in the jungle produced the best results. This equation was not always achievable as conditions in the jungle were not always completely controllable but on the whole the strategy produced fantastic results.

For night sequences in the jungle I wanted to accentuate the weirdness and fear that the jungle could evoke. My intention was for my night treatment to elicit a claustrophobic feeling

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of one of our characters, so too would the level of blue saturation in the jungle. To achieve this I hit the cast with various grades of warmth with the intention of correcting skin tones in the grade, thus shifting the entire image into the cooler end of the spectrum. Prior to the shoot, tests of this were sent back to Al Hanson at Frame Set and Match, to determine the right amount of warmth and exposure. The tests revealed that hitting the actors with full CTO and having them

and a sense of dread infused with the malaise of dysentery and malaria. In addition to this, I wanted night to be sharp and high contrast like a soldier would perhaps sense it to be in a radically heightened state as opposed to the monochromatic nature of moonlight. I would light the actors with a soft fill gelled with a 1/2 CTS on tungsten and backlight with a 1/2 blue and 1/2 magenta on HMI. The final battle scene depicting the battle for Isurava, where the



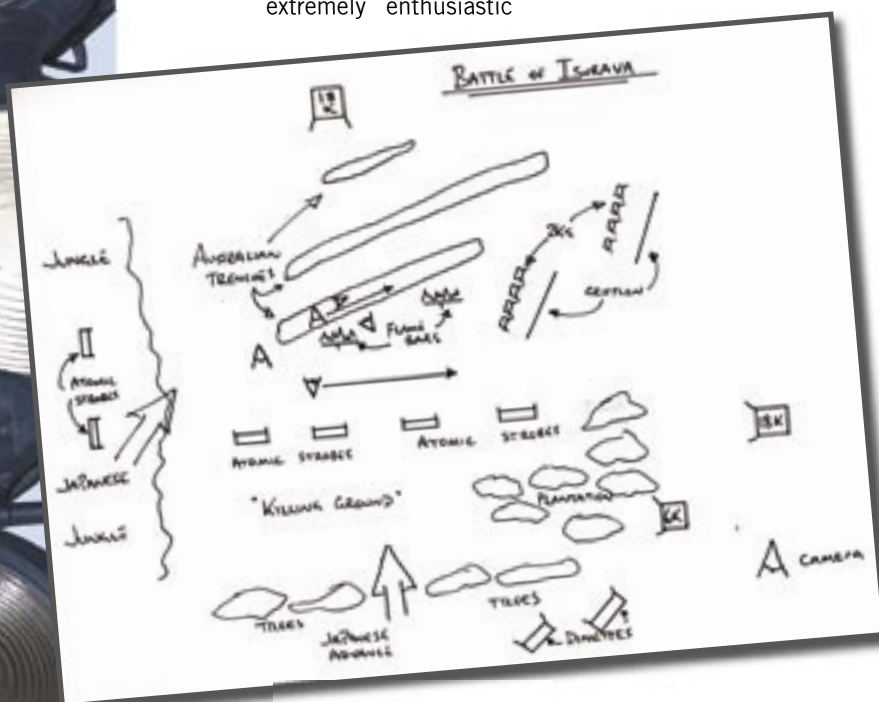
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39th and 2/14th fought against far superior numbers, was the largest and most ambitious sequence of the shoot. I backlit the Australian trenches with an 18k gelled with 1/2 blue and 1/2 magenta. Fill was provided by a combination of 2ks gelled with 1/2 CTS bounced into 12X12 griffons and two large flame bars that would fluctuate in intensity during the course of the battle. Atomic strobes gelled with 1/2 CTS and CTO would provide lighting effects from muzzle flash and mortar fire. The "killing ground" would be cross-lit with an 18k and a 6k with the moonlight gel pack and through the jungle in deep background two dinettes gelled with yellows and reds on flicker boxes would provide a strange pulsating glow. This light in a literal sense represented the burning of Isurava village in the distance but in a non-literal way it was to represent the mental state of the hopelessly outnumbered Australians as they waited for the inevitable assault.

The film was shot almost entirely handheld, as we wanted to imbue the film with a real sense of immediacy, almost as if the camera was an unseen member of the patrol. I operated the A camera and for the B camera and second unit work I was lucky to have Mark Wareham ACS for the first three weeks and Henry Pierce ACS for the final two. These two men were extremely enthusiastic

about the story and the way in which we wanted to tell it. I had a wonderful camera department with Margie McClymont pulling focus and Phil Lavery loading. My gaffer Peter Bushby was instrumental in helping me achieve the look and feel that we were going for on the film and to provide the humour when the chips were down. Brett McDowell was my key grip and he was extraordinary. Without his support (literally) I would have returned from Queensland either in traction or in a body bag. He built me a bungy cam to operate in difficult terrain such as on steep hillsides, a stretcher cam to film our wounded soldier and the famous wok cam. The latter is simply the camera sitting on a cine saddle placed inside a large wok. It allows for slick multi directional operating while maintaining the handheld feel. This high tech device evolved further into what we called the techno-wok. With a grip on each handle of the wok we could perform small but very difficult crane moves in the dodgiest of places. The wok would be commandeered at lunchtime by catering and returned sparkling for the afternoon session.

Principal photography was 26 days, cut back from an original 30 days so our schedule was extremely tight for what we wanted to achieve. The film was shot entirely on location on or around Mt Tambourine. It was at



times a very arduous shoot taking into consideration the difficult terrain and at times inclement weather. We did not have the luxury to wait for ideal light nor could we stop for downpours. Conditions constantly changed on the mountain so we had to adapt to this quickly and effectively. We had to shoot rain, hail or shine. The only time we bailed out of a location was the night a huge storm literally blew us out of a gorge we were shooting in. We immediately set up in the unit tent and shot the close-ups for the scene.

One of our greatest fears after returning from PNG was finding suitable locations within Australia that were easily accessible but with the guidance of our experienced Production Designer, Nick McCallum, we were able to find pockets of sub-tropical rainforest which provided a completely realistic environment in which to tell our story. Nick also designed and had built two mountain villages that were superb, right down to the finest detail.

Stocks used on the shoot were Kodak 5205 250D for day exteriors and 5218 500T for nights. Both stocks performed tremendously, but I was particularly impressed with the latitude on the 250D keeping detail in shadow areas and holding highlights exceptionally well which is really encouraging when shooting in a high contrast environment such as a jungle. Simon Russell, from Cameraquip Brisbane, provided a great package comprising a Moviecam SL and Moviecam Compact. I shot with Ultra Primes and an Angenieux 10:1 zoom.

I'm presently completing a DI with colourist Al Hanson at Frame Set and Match, Sydney where owner Steve Dunn has built a state-of-the-art \$2m DI suite. The neg was scanned using the Northlight scanner at 6k resolution and scaled down to 2k. Grading is then carried out with Baselight. The image is then projected on the Barco DP 100 digital projector (full 2k film resolution) calibrated by Truelight to match how the final film will be projected when released to the wider audience.

The neg will then be lasered out at WETA in NZ using the Arri Lazer, then processed and printed at Parkroad Post in Wellington. Al Hanson's sensitivity and understanding of the subject matter, his skills as a colourist and good humour have been a huge asset to the film.

In the words of Peter Brune, "It should never be forgotten that during those critical six months of the Papuan campaign, Australians stood up and essentially saved themselves. If it was a bastard of a place in 1942-43, it is now no less sacred ground than Gallipoli." As postproduction draws to a close on *Kokoda* I believe that we, the filmmakers, have treated this story with the respect, dedication and passion that it deserves. I hope that we have illuminated the qualities of the men of the 39th and all those who fought on the Kokoda Track in WWII.

***Kokoda* will be in cinemas this Anzac Day.**

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