



FROM THE GALLERIES AND COLLECTION OF THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY MUSEUM OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Typically only a small portion of a museum collection is exhibited at any one time. This is due not only to practical consideration of display space but a range of professional considerations designed to protect and preserve the artefact.

This series highlights objects and stories you may have overlooked in the galleries or collection items awaiting the opportunity to be viewed and share their story. Enjoy and explore further.

Kokoda Diorama – Brigade Hill

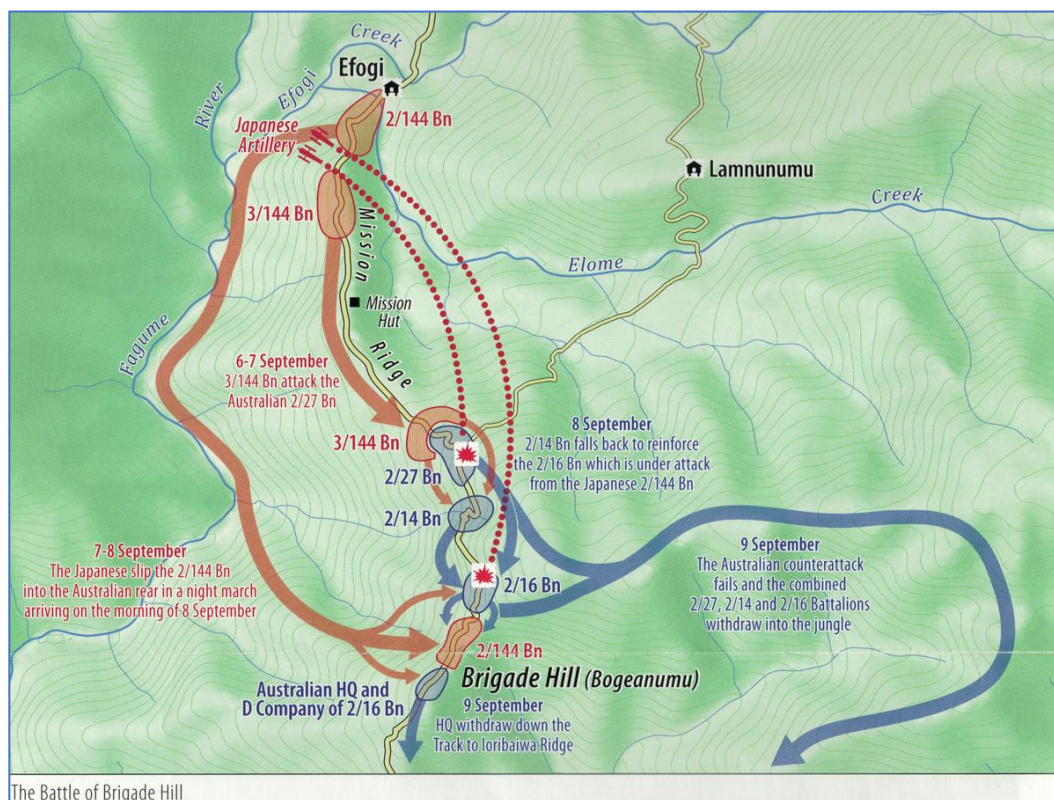


There is an ongoing debate in academic circles about the role museums play in commemoration. Some authors argue that displays confer legitimacy on specific interpretations of history, and attribute significance to particular events and thus act as memorials to those who were killed or served in war. By taking a commemorative approach to interpretation, it is counter-argued that military museums are using outdated imagery and narratives of glory and sacrifice, which are no longer widely accepted by society.

The realities and challenges of the daily management of a volunteer based, community or regional museum, mean that there is little local engagement with this debate, except perhaps through attendance at a major museum conference or professional development session.

The forthcoming anniversary of the Battle of Mission Ridge – Brigade Hill, also known as the Battle of Efogi, offers the Australian Army Museum of Western Australia the opportunity to examine elements of this debate and its presentation of battles along the Kokoda Trail.

The Battle of Mission Ridge - Brigade Hill was fought between 6 and 9 September 1942 as part of the Kokoda Track campaign. It was one of a series of battles fought against the Japanese South Seas Detachment under Major General Tomitaro Horii in his attempted advance south across Papua and New Guinea to capture Port Moresby. At Mission Ridge, the Australian defenders were *Marouba Force* commander by Brigadier Arnold Potts and consisting primarily of 2/14, 2/16 and 2/27 Infantry Battalions of 21 Brigade, 7 Division.



Forward of Mission Ridge, the Japanese used fire and movement in repeated frontal attacks against the 2/27th Battalion. They probed the flanks from impossible positions and attacked the 2/14th and 2/16th Battalions. Every element of the 21st Brigade was now engaged in the battle. The Japanese exploited vulnerable areas. Brigade Headquarters was attacked and cut off from the forward battalions, Marouba Force began a confused fighting withdrawal. The 2/27th Battalion withdrew along the high ground to the south-east whilst the other two battalions withdrew through the jungle to rejoin the main trail at Menai.

The 2/27th Battalion were isolated in the jungle and regarded as a lost battalion as they struggled with their wounded and without food over the next 21 days. Potts consolidated his two remaining battalions which had been reduced to 307 men at Menai in the hope the 2/27th would link up with them. They soon came under heavy fire from the Japanese mountain guns on the high ground above Efogi and began a fighting withdrawal on 10 September.

There was much panic back in Australia which caused a crisis of command as tensions rose between General Macarthur, Prime Minister Curtin and General Blamey. Brigadier Potts was relieved of his command and replaced by Brigadier Porter who had orders to stabilise the situation. The battle-weary remnants of the 21st Brigade withdrew to Ioribaiwa Ridge to secure the position and allow 730 fresh troops from the 25th Brigade under Brigadier Eather to conduct a passage of lines and begin the offensive against the Japanese.

Notwithstanding Gallipoli, current opinion supports the idea that World War 2 was the conflict that most shaped Australia during the 20th century, involving as it did a shift of alliances. The Australian War Memorial is up front with its commemoration as related by Dr Karl James, Head of Military History:

“Kokoda has become one of Australia’s best-known wartime campaigns. It has come to represent qualities such as courage, sacrifice and mateship. Remembering Kokoda reminds us of what it means to be an Australian. ... The significance and understanding of Australia’s involvement in the Second World War evolves because of how we remember. It is crucial for Australia to remember and share this knowledge.”

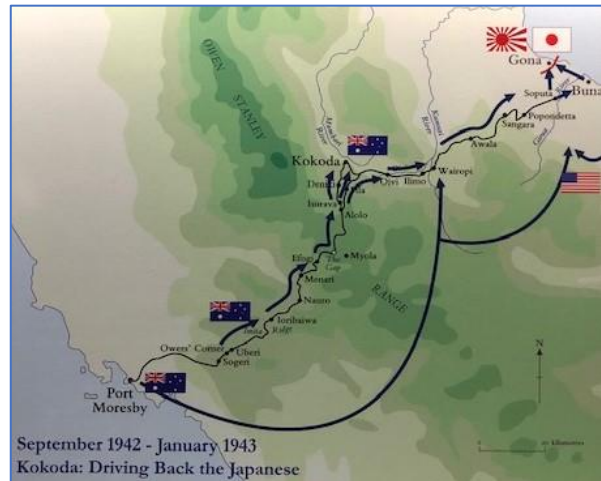
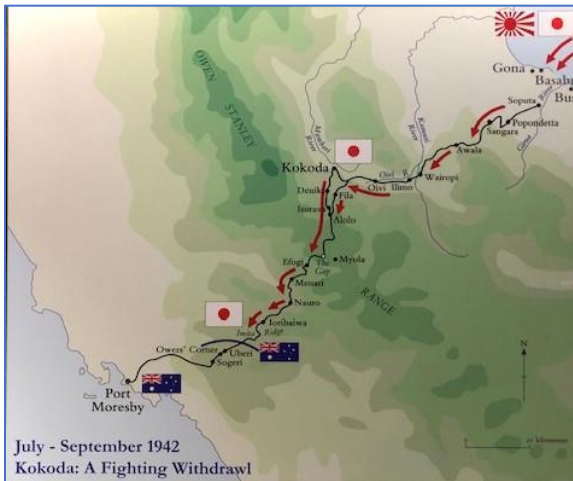


The Army Museum’s presentation of the campaigns in Papua and New Guinea is dominated by a ‘show stopper’ diorama rightfully commended for its impact and realistic presentation of diggers moving upward on the Kokoda Trail. It fulfills its purpose of causing the visitor to stop and view and to consider the supporting displays.

The second element of the display is a large map showing the operational theatres North to South from Manchuria to Australia and east to west from Midway to the Bay of Bengal. Its purpose is to provide a broad context for the New Guinea campaign and primarily covers the period December 1941 to August 1942. Some viewers find the map confusing because it overlays events that happened sequentially over that 9-month period. It also alludes to subsequent Australian operations in the South-West Pacific theatre. Without a budget for interactive graphics, a static map with its limitations was the only practical way to present the sweep of Japanese and Allied military activity in the area.

“They gave their lives. For that public gift they received a praise which never ages and a tomb most glorious – not so much a tomb in which they lie, but that in which their fame survives, to be remembered forever when occasion comes for word or deed ...”

Extract from Pericles' Funeral Oration by Thucydides as quoted in Guide to Australian War Memorial, New Revised Edition, 1957



Within the space constraints of the Gallery, the Kokoda campaign is presented via two maps split between the fighting withdrawl and the following clearing advance. The text panels emphasise Western Australian stories linked to Brigadier Potts and also 2/16 Battalion. A cross section graphic supports the diorama to provide an impression of the terrain over which the campaign was fought. Exhibits are balanced between small personal items of Japanese and Australian origin as well as relic weapons.

The editorial or curatorial tone of the exhibit is perhaps best described as respectful commemoration based on the realities of a hard fought campaign in the context of significant operational and supply difficulties. The facts are presented without myth making or glorification as the realities speak for themselves. Visitors are free to draw their own conclusions but the deeds are hopefully remembered and shared.

<https://www.icms-journal.com/articles/10.5334/jcms.7013/>

<https://collections.wa.net.au/node/5538>

<https://www.amazon.com.au/Kokoda-Campaign-1942-Myth-Reality/dp/1107015944>

