



## THE KOKODA TRACK

He stood at the shrine  
With a boy by his side,  
A digger and grandson –  
With them was pride.

I heard him say  
In a faltering voice  
Words that were poignant:  
“We didn’t have choice

“We went up the steps  
On the Imita Slopes –  
Two thousand there were,  
With no guiding ropes.

Then over Maguli  
With three thousand more;  
We did it for peace –  
Though this was war.

“We passed through Maguli  
And went to Nauro,  
Then on to Menari  
With Efogi below;  
Then up to the Gap  
And Iora Creek  
And Isurava  
Where history speaks.

“Kokoda was nestled  
In a valley ahead,  
And while we waited  
Our orders were read.  
If we were defeated  
All would be lost –  
Port Moresby would fall,  
Invasion the cost.

“We were a battalion  
Consisting of boys,  
The new Thirty-ninth  
To stall was our ploy.  
We had to hang on  
And live by the sword  
Till veterans returned –  
From serving abroad.

“The cream of our forces  
Were coming back,  
And of fighting men  
They were the cracks.  
We were militia  
We hardly trained  
For this encounter  
In terrible terrain.

“But after a week  
Word went around:  
We would withdraw  
On treacherous ground.  
Through jungle mountains  
In fighting retreat,  
Through tropical rain,  
Coldness and heat.

“Japanese were advancing –  
But they hadn't won.  
Tired and exhausted  
We carried our guns  
On that track of hell,  
Waist deep in mud –  
But leaving a trail  
Of sweat and blood.

“The natives assisted –  
They acted as guides,  
They lent their shoulders –  
On them we relied.  
We fought for time –  
An hour was a day;  
We knew reinforcements  
Were on their way.

“Imagine a track  
Designed by the devil  
To torture and probe,  
And where he could revel  
In the suffering and pain  
Of God-fearing men –  
Imagine it boy,  
And think again.

“For unless you were there  
With a pack on your back,  
In the mud and the slush  
And your mind on the rack,  
You cannot believe  
What diggers went through  
For freedom, their country,  
Your sister and you.

“One hundred miles  
They said it would be  
For us to defend  
With backs to the sea;  
One hundred miles –  
Where a step was an inch,  
One hundred miles –  
Where you would flinch

“As leeches ravaged  
Your legs and your shins  
While bodies were torn  
By low-lying limbs;  
One hundred miles  
Where boots peeled away  
And clothes became rags  
In less than a day.

“But in that withdrawal  
We made our stands,  
And when reinforced  
We took command.  
We turned on the foe  
And inflicted defeat –  
And they broke away  
In unscheduled retreat.

“At the river Kumusi  
Their general drowned;  
We claimed our victory  
And reclaimed our ground.  
We’d won the battle  
For Kokoda’s Track  
I’ve reminisced,  
I have been back...

“I stood on the ridges  
Where I stood long ago,  
I thought of those diggers  
I used to know.  
I looked at the valleys,  
The jungle and all,  
And thought of those boys  
Who answered the call.

“I saw their graves,  
I shed some tears;  
I couldn’t believe  
It’s been sixty years  
Since I won a medal –  
For valour they said,  
But other meanings  
Have to be read.

“That medal’s for all  
Who battled that track,  
It is for mates  
Who never came back.  
It’s for the courage  
Of thousands of men  
Who fought in conditions  
Not seen again.

“Of five hundred boys  
Who saluted with me  
In the famed Thirty-ninth  
Just a handful I see;  
For near all were lost  
In that northern war –  
Just eighty odd lads  
Returned to our shore...

“This is a shrine  
That honours all diggers –  
This is where memories  
Are fostered and triggered;  
And when you are here  
Think of that trail  
Where a step was a triumph,  
When victory was veiled.

“And think of Kingsbury  
Who won the VC,  
The first on our soil –  
It’s well known to me  
How devoid of fear  
He stormed an outpost  
And opened a path  
Back to the coast.

“The spirit of Anzacs  
Travelled that trail –  
When there was challenge  
It would prevail.  
That spirit’s a force  
Greater than guns;  
It is the reason  
We endured and we won”.

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Authors Note: this poem is written from the perspective of the 39th Battalion, the first to engage the Japanese in New Guinea. I pay tribute to the heroic involvement of the following units in the Kokoda campaign.

Brigades – 25th, 16th, 21st (from 6th & 7th Divisions)  
Battalions – 2/14th, 2/16th, 2/27th, 3rd, 39th, 53rd  
Field Regiment – 14th  
And others

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