CATHOLIC
ARCHDIOCESE OF RABAUL
Archbishop Rochus J. Tatamai MSC

Bishops House, Vunapope
Williams Road
PO Box 357
KOKOPO, ENBP 613

Telephone: (675) 982 9834
Digicel: (675) 72363695

Email: abrt@aorabaul.org

03rd November 2026

KOKODA DAY SERVICE
AT KOKODA TRACK MEMORIAL WALKWAY (KTMW)

Your Excellency, The Honorable Sam Mostyn AC, Governor of the Commonwealth of Australia, The Honorable Richard Marles, Acting Prime Minister of Australia and Defense Minister, The Honorable David Harris MP, NSW Minister for Veterans, The Honorable Guests, Veterans, Members of the defense Forces of Australia and Papua New Guinea, the Families of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, Students and Children, Ladies and Gentlemen.

We gather today, on the 3rd of November, to commemorate Kokoda Day.

This day marks one of the most defining chapters in the shared history of Australia and Papua New Guinea.

The historical importance of this Day cannot be overstated. Between July and November 1942, along the narrow, muddy, treacherous 96-kilometre track over the Owen Stanley Range, the fate of our region was decided. Had the Kokoda Track fallen, Port Moresby would have fallen. Had Port Moresby fallen, the door to Australia would have been open.

What happened on that track was not just a battle. It was the defense of a way of life, a culture of genuine love and freedom, and a mutual co-existence of the unbreakable bond between two peoples. For the first time, Australians fought to defend Australian soil not in distant lands, but on the doorstep of the continent, on Papua New Guinean soil, shoulder to shoulder with the people of Papua New Guinea.

Secondly, today we honor bravery and courage of the highest order.

We honor the young Australian military men, the 39th Battalion - the young teenagers, (average age 18-19) many untrained, who held back a seasoned Japanese Imperial Army. We honor the 2nd AIF - the 7th Division, the 21st and 25th Brigades - who came back from the Middle East to fight in conditions they could never have imagined.

They fought not on open fields, but in jungle so thick you could not see ten metres ahead. They fought in cold rain, in mud to the knees, with malaria, dysentery, hunger, and with no proper supply line. Yet they never gave up. Their courage was expressed in the Australian spirit of mateship - never leaving a mate behind.

And that courage was matched by the courage and perseverance of the Papuan Infantry Battalion and the Royal Papuan Constabulary, the first to face the enemy at Awala and Oivi.

Thirdly, on this sacred and memorable day, we give special honor and acknowledgement to our home grown and natural heroes, "**the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels."**

They were not soldiers by uniform, but they were angels by deed and true spirit of the Good Samaritan. As the grateful Australian soldiers named them, "*these Papua New Guinean carriers and stretcher-bearers carried ammunition to the front line, and carried our wounded down the track on stretchers made of bush timber, often for days, through enemy fire and pouring rain*."

They did not have to do this. But with the spirit of fellow human compassionate love and care, with gentle hands and smiling faces, they lived the true meaning and demonstrated firsthand the real experience of "Wantok" - one talk, one people, one journey, one humanity, one planet. Many of them died. We will never forget them. As one Australian digger said, "*They carried us as if we were their brothers."*

We also remember on this Day a deeper and spiritual sacrifice. During that same war, over in the New Guinea Islands Region of PNG, our own Blessed, now Saint, Peter ToRot of Rakunai, East New Britain Province, was canonized "Saint" by Pope Leo 14th on the 19th of October 2025. Peter ToRot was martyred by the Japanese during their occupation of Rabaul between 1942 - 1945.

When the Japanese forbade all Christian worship and forced his people into hardship, Peter ToRot, a lay catechist, husband and father, continued to pray, to teach, to baptize children, and to defend Christian marriage. For this fidelity to his Christian faith and his own people, he was arrested and killed by lethal injection, from which he never recovered - in July 1945.

His martyrdom reminds us that the war in Papua New Guinea was not only a military campaign, but a test of faith, a trial in conscience, and a direct attack on human dignity and well-being. Saint Peter ToRot stands as the eternal symbol of Papua New Guinean courage and steadfast conviction - that true freedom is spiritual as well as physical.

Finally, what does Kokoda teach and inspires us to be today? As we look to the future of mutual cooperation between the Governments and Peoples of Australia and Papua New Guinea, let me highlight three enduring lessons.

***Lesson One: Our Security is Shared and Indivisible**.** Kokoda taught us that Australia cannot be secure without a secure and strong Papua New Guinea, and Papua New Guinea is stronger when Australia stands with it. This is the foundation of the most recent PNG- Australia Mutual Defense Treaty also known as the "**PukPuk Treaty"** – Pukpuk is Tok Pisin for Crocodile – found in both our countries – known for stillness and sudden power. It's a symbol of the alliance.

***Lesson Two: True Partnership is People-to-People**.** The alliance was not made in offices, but on the Track, between a wounded digger and the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel who carried him. Today,

our mutual and bi-lateral cooperation must remain the same - built on mutual respect, inclusive equality, and boundless wantokism, through education, health, labour mobility, and church partnerships.

Lesson Three: Courage Means Service to Others. The soldiers, the Angels, and Saint Peter ToRot all showed us that courage is not for oneself, but more definitely for and towards others. Our two governments must continue to serve our common people with that same spirit of sacrifice, especially in the face of new and relevant challenges - climate change, regional security, and youth unemployment.

KOKODA - The Track That Binds Us

On mud and mist, the Owen Stanleys Rangers stood,
Two nations met where angels never would.

Mates from Australia, brothers of PNG soil,
Held the line through blood and rain and toil.
Not for glory, but for mateship's creed – and brother's sake
Never leave a brother in his need.

Then came the Angels, barefoot, strong and true,
Fuzzy Wuzzy - God sent them to carry the needy through.
No gun they held, but love upon their back,
A wounded digger down the bloody track.

And one more voice, in dark Rakunai's night,
Peter ToRot, who kept the altar alight.
No sword could break the faith for which he died,
A martyr's crown, our nation's Oceania's pride.

Three lessons whisper from that sacred ground:
Our safety shared, where wantok drums resound.
Our strength not treaties, but hand in hand,
And courage lives to serve the other of one's own humanity.

We are one Track. We are one Story. We are one Journe, We are one Humanity
May the Spirit of Kokoda live on.
We will remember them.
Lest We Forget.

+Rochus Josef Tatamai MSC DD CSM
Archbishop of Rabaul, Papua New Guinea