

Defence 2020

The Spirit of the Maroubra Force

By Tessa Johnston
Loyola College

'You must show strength of character and toughness when and if required. Never let a fault or a sloppy activity become norm. Set high standards and enforce them. You must have both physical and moral courage and love your mates.'

Although it was on the shores of the Gallipoli peninsula, where the ANZAC legend was birthed and forged it grew to even more significance during WWII when Australia had to defend itself from a possible Japanese invasion along the Kokoda trail. The young men's survival, and that of the nation, relied upon their ANZAC Spirit.

The spirit of the Anzacs was embraced by Australia's youth during the Kokoda campaign, many holding the essence of the Anzac within them. It may be difficult to characterise the spirit of the Anzacs, but you know it, when you see it. The image of the Anzac is delivered from an amalgam of *courage, determination, mateship, teamwork, trust, initiative, endurance and compassion.*

Every day during the Kokoda campaign, many young Australians put their lives on the line to protect Australia. All these young Australians displayed fine qualities.

With the ANZAC spirit emerging when they were called upon in times of need, all possessing the same spirit that the original Anzacs had shown, truly displaying that the Anzac spirit was very much alive within our soldiers on the Kokoda trail. They all demonstrated exceptional courage to confront and fight the Japanese. Although it was generally accepted Maroubra force was poorly trained, outnumbered and under-resourced, the resistance they put up was such that, according to captured documents, the Japanese believed they were fighting a vastly superior force. Even though the initial belief was that the Maroubra force, made up of Australian Militia (Army Reserve) were inferior.

'The biggest fear I think that I had was that we got issued with Thompson Sub-Machine guns the day before we left, and my men had never ever fired a Thompson Sub-machine, never seen one in their lives.'

Despite this belief and lack of training, they courageously fought for the freedom of their country. Because courage is not a man with a gun in his hand. It's knowing you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. And in this case of the Maroubra force, they did win, due to the fine qualities that these young men demonstrated when faced with true obstacles and challenges.

The battle of the Kokoda trail had lasted from 22 July to 16 November and ended in complete defeat for the Japanese. At the end of June 1942, one thousand Maroubra force, had been ordered to hold Kokoda and its airfield against any possible Japanese attack.

A Japanese force landed near Gona on the north coast of Papua, with orders to investigate and attempt the feasibility of using a route over the mountains to launch an attack on the major Allied base at Port Moresby on the south coast, with the intention of supporting an amphibious landing at Port Moresby – a plan which gave way to another major battle around Milne Bay.

Opposing the Japanese was Maroubra Force, comprising of 300-strong Papuan Infantry Battalion and an Australian militia unit, the 39th Battalion. The 39th was sent overland via the Kokoda track to secure the Buna area and prepare to oppose their enemy. On 21 July 1942, the Japanese landed on the northeast coast of Papua and the Maroubra force was overwhelmed by the Japanese troops, and the entrance was captured on 29 July 1942.

Maroubra Force then successfully fought a month long preventing action through the debilitating terrain of the Owen Stanley Ranges, before being reinforced and finally driving off the Japanese just outside of Port Moresby.

The Kokoda and Buna-Gona battles took a heavy toll on the soldiers of Maroubra Force. As an example, following both battles the 39th Battalion mustered barely 30 survivors the remainder either being dead, missing, wounded or in hospitals in Port Moresby and northern Australia suffering from disease and exhaustion.

The terrain was steep and very unforgiving with stinking mud and dangerous, slippery tracks going through the wet sodden jungles of Papua. The Kokoda trail crosses some of the most rugged and harsh terrain in the world and combines hot humid days with intensely cold nights, torrential rainfall and tropical diseases such as malaria.

Maroubra Force endured days of violent attacks from aggressive, well-trained and well led Japanese troops. They were subjected to heavy mortar, mountain gun and small arms fire. Maroubra Force was outnumbered, underequipped and fought with low rations, ammunition, medical supplies and with little sleep.

Although they carried out many withdrawals, Maroubra Force significantly delayed the Japanese advance allowing Australian re-enforcements to also engage the Japanese forces and overall defeat them.

The situations that the soldiers encountered called upon this special amalgam of traits and characteristics. A set of divine qualities that resulted in their survival and the freedom of Australia. These were displayed when the soldiers of the Maroubra force were confronted with adverse circumstances.

'One of the hardest days we have yet put in for the track led us down many hills, across creeks, up steep and rugged hills and tested our every muscle and every ounce of our endurance. We had no clue as to whether the track was leading us back to civilization or not and again we find ourselves cheering each other up.'

They displayed incredible endurance, continuing to move forward in the face of great pain and suffering, also relying heavily upon their mates and always displaying great teamwork and friendship, never leaving a man behind.

'Butch was shot in the stomach by a machine-gun and as the platoon later withdrew his men carried him out...Don and I were with him, Don administering morphine, whilst I held his hand, and at times we talked. He died at 4 am. No man had a finer brother.'

The soldiers also showed incredible determination, even when the outcome looked dire and the conditions were terrible, they did not stop fighting, they charged on forward with their heads held high, for the nation.

'It should be borne in mind that many of these men for a week or more, had been wet through and cold continuously either fighting or marching, and had lived solely on an often inadequate supply of bully beef, biscuits and water.'

Every day they confronted obstacles and experienced frightening situations but they did not budge, showing amazing courage. Everything they did was amazingly courageous from fighting the Japanese to saving their own men. The Maroubra also showed great initiative when times called upon them.

'During the step-by-step withdrawal the operation was executed with text book precision and control; no man left his post before his turn came, we left no wounded and no prisoners.'

Surely no war was ever fought under worse conditions than these. Surely no war has ever demanded more of a man in fortitude, than the war fought by the Maroubra Force.

These qualities, though forged in the past are still very important and prevalent among the ADF today, with the ANZAC spirit making the Defence force different to any other career opportunity.

Every day many young Australians put their lives on the line in our defence forces. All these young Australians display fine qualities, with their spirit emerging when they are called upon in times of need. They all possess the same spirit that the Anzacs had and truly show that the Anzac spirit is still alive within our ADF.

The incident that occurred a year ago in the Royal Australian Navy demonstrates this, when a boat full of refugees and asylum seekers was blown up. Though some Australians were also caught in the blast they put aside their own injuries to save the lives of those on board. Once the recovery was done that was only the start. Even though the crew of the patrol boat had their own injuries and emotional traumas they dismissed these and saved the lives of the injured who were suffering from terrible burns and other horrific injuries. These young Australians especially that day displayed outstanding Anzac spirit all showing courage, compassion and selflessness. It truly does exist amongst our ADF.

Every day the spirit and qualities of the Anzacs is lived out by many different ADF members from all walks of life in Australia. Whether it is in our local community, on a global scale in Iraq or on a patrol boat in the Gulf of Carpentaria the spirit is alive among many as we remember our grandparents and their courage. As courage is not the absence of fear, rather knowing that something else is more important.

Reference

- The Spirit of Kokoda, Then and Now – By Patrick Lindsay
- Diggers, The Australian Army, Navy and Air Force in Eleven Wars – George Odgers
- Those Ragged Bloody Heroes, from the Kokoda Trail to Gona Beach 1942 – Peter Brune

By Tessa Johnston

Loyola College