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# ***Retreat to Imita: the final stage of the Australian withdrawal on the Kokoda Trail***



**Rowan Tracey**

*Rowan Tracey re-examines the historic record of the Kokoda campaign of 1942. He concludes controversially that, had the Australian reinforcements gone straight to Ioribaiwa, the retreat to Imita Ridge would not have been necessary. With no firm base at Ioribaiwa when the Japanese attacked, the Australians had little choice but to withdraw. He also asserts that the subsequent follow-up of the Japanese withdrawal was anything but vigorous. He assigns responsibility for these shortcomings primarily to the divisional and brigade commanders.*

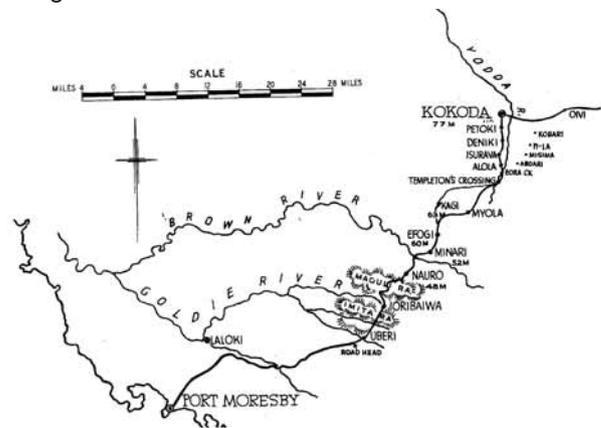
**Key words:** World War II; Papuan Campaign; Australian Army; Japanese Army; Kokoda Trail; Ioribaiwa; Imita Ridge; Allen; Eather; Horii.

At 0815 hours on 16 September 1942, Major-General Arthur Allen, Commander, 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, received a signal from Brigadier Kenneth Eather<sup>1</sup> one of his forward commanders on the Kokoda Trail. The Australian force defending the Kokoda Trail had just withdrawn to Ioribaiwa Ridge in the face of an all-conquering Japanese Army. Eather, who commanded 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade, requested permission to withdraw back further to Imita Ridge, if he decided it was necessary. Imita Ridge was the last defensible barrier to prevent the Japanese from reaching their objective – Port Moresby. The request was one of the most momentous of the Kokoda campaign and its ramifications extended back to the highest level of government in Australia. Much has been written about the repercussions of the withdrawal, but there is little analysis concerning the battle itself or of the decisions of the Australian commanders.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Brigade Withdraws to Ioribaiwa Ridge**

From the time that the Japanese landed on the north coast of the Australian Territory of Papua on 21 July 1942, the Australian soldiers who had been sent to oppose them had been pushed back along the Kokoda Trail by a well-trained, numerically-superior and experienced enemy. Following the battle at Brigade Hill/Efogi on 7-9 September, the Australians withdrew in

some disarray, with 2/27<sup>th</sup> Battalion missing in action. The battle-weary and depleted 2/14<sup>th</sup> and 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalions withdrew to Nauro where they joined a company of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion that had moved north to support them. On 10 September, Commander 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade, Brigadier Arnold Potts, was informed by Brigadier Selwyn Porter that he had orders to replace him. Porter was to take over all forward troops, including Potts' 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 2/1<sup>st</sup> Pioneer Battalion and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. Potts was faced with a return to Port Moresby to meet with General Allen, following the "near disaster at Efogi"<sup>2</sup>.



<sup>1</sup>Eather served in the militia in Australia following his commissioning in May 1923. At the outbreak of World War II, he immediately joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF and raised 2/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion which he commanded. After serving with distinction at Bardia and Tobruk in North Africa, he was promoted to brigadier. He commanded 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade in New Guinea until July 1945 when he was promoted to major-general as Commander 11<sup>th</sup> Division. He retired from the Army in 1947 as a highly respected senior officer.

<sup>2</sup>This is the title that Sublet (2000) aptly used for his chapter on the battle at Brigade Hill/Efogi. Sublet was a company commander in 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalion and was part of the composite battalion at Ioribaiwa.

Porter formed a composite battalion of 2/14<sup>th</sup> and 2/16<sup>th</sup> Battalions under Lieutenant-Colonel Albert Caro, because of their reduced numbers (there were less than 200 fit men remaining). This composite battalion used a number of ambushes on the track over the Maguli Range to delay the Japanese advance, culminating in an action on Ofi Creek, at the base of Ioribaiwa Ridge, where the Japanese suffered at least 20 casualties. In this ambush the Japanese, in their hunger, abandoned normal security precautions to get to rations that were left by the Australians, who were increasingly disdainful of the hackneyed tactics employed by the Japanese (Sublet 2000, 81). The composite battalion took up a defensive position about half-way up the spur from Ofi Creek to cover the likely Japanese approaches. The battalion headquarters and headquarters company were located to the rear and just south of the top of the ridge. Situated to the right hand (eastern) side of the composite battalion was 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. The company commanders were briefed that the position had to be held until relief was provided by 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Uren 1959, 152-3).

### **25th Brigade Plans**

25<sup>th</sup> Brigade reached Port Moresby on 9 September. The mood in Port Moresby was one of 'desperate defeatism' and soldiers were dismayed when they were told that if they were wounded they would have to look after themselves (Crooks 1971, 146-8). The brigade moved immediately to McDonalds Corner to join 7<sup>th</sup> Division. Allen had decided to hold Ioribaiwa Ridge (despite contrary advice from Porter) without sufficient knowledge of the topography (Braga 2004, 205). The available maps, with no contour lines and key features missing, were inadequate and a ground reconnaissance had not been completed. As well, information on the enemy's strength and intentions was not clear.

The 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade, in moving north to Ioribaiwa Ridge, was hampered by these serious impediments. At Uberi on 11 September, Eather spoke by telephone to Porter at Ioribaiwa Ridge, where Japanese activity had been indecisive and tentative. This discussion between Eather and Porter was critical in the context of what was to follow. There is little information about their conversation, but it would seem highly unlikely that Porter would have said that he had the capability to hold Ioribaiwa Ridge whilst Eather by-passed him. With the need to provide relief to the exhausted composite battalion and the need to provide support to the untried 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion on Porter's mind, it is hard to understand how this discussion resulted in the high risk strategy that Eather took. Lacking first-hand experience in New Guinea, Eather devised an ambitious plan to deploy two of his battalions around each side of Porter's force on Ioribaiwa Ridge with the objective of reaching Nauro. His third battalion would follow in the centre along the main track. So his plan was not to establish a firm base at Ioribaiwa Ridge or to provide specific relief to the composite battalion. Unfortunately, Eather had not

taken the opportunity of speaking in detail about the tactics and strength of the Japanese when he passed Potts on the Trail. Potts would have been a better source of information than either Allen or his superior Lieutenant-General Sydney Rowell. Nevertheless, Eather proceeded with his enveloping tactics, which he had employed in exercises in Queensland where conditions were quite different. In New Guinea, Eather's soldiers had to contend with a more hostile environment and an unrelenting enemy. Eather was soon to realise that the Japanese were anything but a spent force.

### **Japanese Intentions**

Following close behind the Australian withdrawal from Menari was the Japanese South Seas Force under the command of Major-General Tomitaro Horii. The heavy casualties suffered by the Japanese at Isurava and Efogi, with the accompanying delay, had infuriated Horii, who sought the annihilation of the Australians. Despite the near collapse of his overextended supply lines, he single-mindedly pursued his objective of Port Moresby. By this time, most of the Japanese soldiers had consumed their 14-days rations and depended on finding abandoned Australian rations or scavenging food from native gardens. When he reached Ofi Creek, Horii's frustration became extreme. He was contemptuous of the capacity of the Australian soldiers to resist him, and yet he came to the realisation that his lack of supplies and his growing casualties would prevent him from reaching his goal. The supreme irony was that at the time he was preparing to attack Ioribaiwa Ridge, he was also commencing his withdrawal to the north coast<sup>3</sup>. As Horii kept his thoughts and decisions to himself and gave no indication to his soldiers of any change in plans, there has been considerable speculation as to the intent of the Japanese at this time. Horii was well aware that he had interpreted his orders for his advance to the limit and that the final order to withdraw could come at any time (Ham 2004, 256). Horii also knew that that he could not proceed further without a supply replenishment, which would have required something of a miracle. He kept the announcement of the withdrawal to as late as possible.

### **The Battle for Ioribaiwa Ridge**

On 13 September, Eather's battalions closed up to the rear of Ioribaiwa Ridge to put his plan into effect. At the same time, without Eather's knowledge, Horii's force commenced an attack on Ioribaiwa Ridge. Eather's three pronged advance soon ran into difficulty. To the left, 2/31st Battalion, which was moving down the spur below Spotter's Hut, contacted a determined enemy force moving up the spur from the opposite direction and pulled back up the ridge where it adopted

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<sup>3</sup>Horii decided late on 14 September 1942 that his force could go no further (Sublet 2000, 83).

a defensive position for the night of the 14/15 September. On the right flank, 2/33rd Battalion followed a route to the east of Imita Ridge to by-pass Ioribaiwa under the guidance of a Papuan non-commissioned officer. In the end, because of the difficult terrain, the route proved to be unviable. The battalion then returned via the main track to Ioribaiwa and thus lost a critical day<sup>4</sup>.



*Japanese attacks on the Australian positions at Ioribaiwa Ridge, 14-15 September 1942*

When 2/33rd Battalion reached Ioribaiwa Ridge, it was late at night and the battalion had to find its way to a defensive position near 3rd Battalion. This proved difficult to control as the battalion was strung out and the position was under fire from a Japanese incursion. It is possible that some casualties were incurred from friendly fire. To the left of 2/33rd Battalion was 3rd Battalion, already positioned close to a prominent conical feature<sup>5</sup>.

The depleted composite battalion, however, was faring worse. Throughout the day in its exposed position north of the Ioribaiwa Ridge, the battalion suffered considerable casualties from mountain-gun and mortar fire and increasing pressure on its perimeter from enemy infantry. It had previously reduced its perimeter by concentrating higher up the ridge, but Porter did nothing to relieve the battalion by moving it further back to a more protected location. The Japanese had moved two mountain guns to a position overlooking Ofi Creek and Ioribaiwa which they employed with damaging accuracy. The result was a growing demoralisation within the composite battalion that had expected to be relieved by 25th Brigade.

Eather's initial optimism of reaching Nauro was dealt a further blow the following day. D Company of 3rd Battalion was caught unprepared by an attack from a

strong enemy patrol from high ground above 2/33rd Battalion. D Company had been moved to a new position to cover a gap in the defensive perimeter on 3rd Battalion's right (Maitland 2002, 224). It had no entrenching tools and, whilst the soldiers were preparing the new position, they became vulnerable to a Japanese attack. The three units in the area – 2/25th, 2/33rd and 3rd Battalions – were unable to shift the Japanese and themselves took casualties<sup>6</sup>.

In the centre, the composite battalion continued to suffer from indirect fire, and, later on 15 September on the left flank, Japanese soldiers, making use of camouflaged positions and snipers, caused further casualties to 2/31st Battalion. Eather's changing attitude was evidenced that night when he told Allen by telephone that he had arrived at Ioribaiwa just in time and was making every effort to stabilise the situation (McCarthy 1959, 231). At this point of the withdrawal, Porter had a responsibility to ensure that the composite battalion (the condition of which he had assessed as critical at Nauro) was relieved at the earliest opportunity. As well, he had to ensure that the untried militia battalion – 3rd Battalion – was supported in its initial contacts with the Japanese. He achieved neither and he and Eather must take responsibility for this.

### **Australians Withdraw to Imita Ridge**

The next morning, Eather requested permission from Allen to withdraw (if necessary). Allen knew well the import of this request and after a subsequent conversation when Eather could not clarify the strength or casualties sustained by the enemy, Allen instructed him *to maintain the offensive for as long as possible*<sup>7</sup>. Quite surprisingly, Allen agreed to delegate the decision to withdraw to Eather, who took the option to withdraw "to a firm base" without further delay<sup>8</sup>. On 17 September, 25th Brigade withdrew to Imita Ridge where they established their defensive position. The only Japanese patrol encountered was decimated in an ambush set by a company of 2/33rd Battalion covering the withdrawal. 2/33rd Battalion had responsibility for the rearguard, with orders to impose a delay of four days on the enemy.

On their depressing return journey, some soldiers in the composite battalion did not realise that they were

<sup>4</sup>Eather had expected 2/33rd Battalion to attack Nauro on the morning of 15 September. He cancelled the order on 14 September (Kennedy 1992, 48).

<sup>5</sup>There is no agreement on the exact position of 2/33rd Battalion relative to 3rd Battalion. 2/33rd Battalion was to the right front of 3rd Battalion in a valley from where it was unable to provide effective support to 3rd Battalion (Kennedy 1992, 48).

<sup>6</sup>Allen had warned Eather not to expose 3rd Battalion (an untried militia battalion) to the Japanese in a forward position (Braga 2004, 205). However, the disorientation and delay in arrival of 2/33rd Battalion at Ioribaiwa Ridge gave Eather little option. The consequences were serious. Porter was scathing in his criticism of the lack of defence that allowed the Japanese lodgement in 3rd Battalion (Ham 2004, 253).

<sup>7</sup>Rowell, too, knew the gravity of the decision. He is reported to have said: "Our heads will be in the basket over this, Tubby", in a conversation he had with Allen (Paull 1958, 223). The withdrawal to Imita Ridge undermined Rowell's confidence (Ham 2004, 254).

<sup>8</sup>With approximately 1500 combat troops remaining of the South Seas Force, the Japanese did not enjoy their previous level of numerical superiority. On the other hand, Eather commanded a fresh brigade along with a new militia battalion. As well, 16th Brigade was in transit to join them (Ham 2004, 255).

part of a general withdrawal. Despite being physically and emotionally drained, they rued the fact that Eather was not holding Ioribaiwa Ridge after the price they had paid and many would have preferred to have stayed there to the bitter end (Sublet 2000, 84). 2/33<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was also surprised when they received the order to withdraw at 1130 hours as they had held their ground and casualties had been light. The reasons given were that the Japanese had infiltrated behind 2/31<sup>st</sup> Battalion and the parlous state of the composite battalion (Crooks 1971, 170-1).

### **Japanese Commence General Withdrawal**

On 14 September, Horii committed his force to an attack on Ioribaiwa Ridge with indirect fire support. The main thrust was in the centre along the Trail, with support coming from separate advances on either side. By that evening, Horii had decided not to continue further than Ioribaiwa Ridge, but would use the position to protect his withdrawal back to the north coast. As a consequence of unrelenting attacks on 16 September, Eather decided to withdraw and Ioribaiwa fell to the Japanese. The Japanese supply line was severed, with supplies often not reaching the front line, as they were consumed by emaciated soldiers along the way. On 16 September, Horii prepared orders for a general withdrawal (Sublet 2000, 85). Two battalions from 41<sup>st</sup> Regiment that had been held back at Nauro departed immediately. They were accompanied by casualties that had moved forward with the main body in the hope of treatment when Port Moresby was reached. Three battalions of 144<sup>th</sup> Regiment also departed, with the last leaving on 26 September. 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of 41<sup>st</sup> Regiment occupied the ridge and set about improving its defences. This was necessary because the Japanese were within range of the Australian artillery for the first time in the campaign. Horii received the final and unequivocal orders to withdraw on 24 September (Collie and Marutani 2009, 139). Symptomatic of the Japanese change in plan was that there was no serious follow-up of the Australian withdrawal south from Ioribaiwa Ridge. The last recorded Japanese patrol encountered by the Australians was about half-way to Imita Ridge and about 40 casualties were inflicted on the Japanese in an ambush (Sublet 2000, 85). There were no reports of any Japanese patrol getting any closer to Port Moresby. At Ioribaiwa Ridge, the Japanese had no choice but to divert their efforts to foraging for food in the adjacent native gardens.

### **MacArthur and Curtin Intervene**

Following the withdrawal of Potts' brigade from Brigade Hill/Efogi, the Australian Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Thomas Blamey, was sent to New Guinea to assess the situation. After his arrival on 12 September, he spent two days conferring with local commanders. He reported back to Prime Minister John Curtin and the Advisory War Council in Australia on 17 September and advised them that he had full confi-

dence in the Australians halting the Japanese advance before it reached Port Moresby. But with the unexpected news of the withdrawal of 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Blamey had to explain why offensive action had changed to defence at Imita Ridge. Blamey was personally taken aback by the news, but was resolute in support of the change, pointing out the strength of the Japanese and the supply difficulties in such a remote area.

General Douglas MacArthur<sup>9</sup>, who had refused to admit that the Japanese were making a serious effort to cross the Owen Stanleys, saw his strategy to retake Rabaul in tatters. He criticised 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade and the senior Australian commanders as being grossly inefficient. The Australian Government and people were shaken by the events in New Guinea and, when MacArthur advised Curtin to send Blamey back to New Guinea "to energise the situation", Curtin complied and ordered his return. Rowell resented Blamey's presence in New Guinea and on the morning of 28 September he was relieved of his command for insubordination<sup>10</sup>. Allen saw himself as the natural successor to Rowell, but Lieutenant-General Edmund Herring was appointed Commander 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Corps. Allen, having made it clear to Blamey of his interest in the position, wrote a letter to him expressing his bitter disappointment on being rejected (Braga 2004, 218-20).

### **Assessment**

Brigadier Eather's unrealistic plan to advance north to Nauro was fraught with difficulty from the outset as he had insufficient knowledge of Japanese strength, disposition and intentions. A ground reconnaissance had not been carried out in the vicinity of Ioribaiwa Ridge and the maps were inadequate<sup>11</sup>. Ioribaiwa Ridge could have been used as a firm base to hold the Japanese and provide relief to the composite battalion. So why was it not used for this purpose, at least initially?

During the Kokoda campaign, unrealistic expectations were placed on forward commanders to take offensive action. At Deniki, Major Alan Cameron, who had taken command of Maroubra Force, attempted to recapture Kokoda, despite cautionary advice from his company commanders. He was seriously outnumbered and lacked knowledge of the location of the Japanese. A better option would have been to use delaying defence tactics. When Potts withdrew his brigade back from Templetons Crossing and First Crossing, he was advised to start taking offensive action against the Japanese to protect the logistic base at Myola. Potts did

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<sup>9</sup>Supreme Allied Commander, South-West Pacific Area. Curtin divested operational control of Australia's armed forces and control of the media to MacArthur.

<sup>10</sup>Rowell's behaviour towards Blamey over a long period was reprehensible and he was quite rightly sacked (Maitland 2005).

<sup>11</sup>In view of Eather's lack of knowledge of the military situation at Ioribaiwa, it is hard to make the claim as Brune (2004, 240) does that Eather's request to withdraw was based on a "...sound military decision".

not have the resources to do this and, in any case, he could have been easily by-passed by the enemy in this area. Quite wisely, he ignored this advice and withdrew to a position he could defend above Efoji where the main tracks met.

So Eather ended up not being able to advance beyond Ioribaiwa Ridge and he did not have the time to redeploy his battalions to hold it. He decided that his brigade was overcommitted. Therefore, he requested clearance to withdraw. Allen assented, but insisted that Eather maintain offensive action. It is hard to see that Eather complied when the opportunity arose. The enemy did not follow up the Australian withdrawal, even with reconnaissance patrols, and Eather's own patrols had not found that the Japanese position on Ioribaiwa Ridge was held strongly. Eather's brigade remained ready for action, with only 96 casualties at Ioribaiwa (Sublet 2000, 90). He should have commenced his advance without undue delay. With the eyes of his superiors, the government and the Australian people on him, perhaps Eather realised that in defending Imita Ridge he was doing what he should have done at Ioribaiwa. The unravelling of his original plan may have induced caution and delay in commencing his advance as he did not want to 'put a foot wrong'.

On 24 September, 2/25th Battalion advanced to within 300 metres of the ridge and destroyed a Japanese outpost, but it was not until 28 September that the three battalions advanced onto the ridge to find it abandoned by the Japanese. The last of the Japanese had departed on 26 September. It was not until 2 October, however, that a complete battalion commenced the pursuit of the Japanese north of Ioribaiwa Ridge – six days after the last of the Japanese had left (Collie and Marutani 2009, 145).

The idea that the Australians maintained substantial pressure on the Japanese at Ioribaiwa Ridge (e.g. Paull 1958, 269) cannot be sustained. The Australians were not even aware of the eventual Japanese withdrawal. It should be remembered that, on 13 September in Eather's original plan, three battalions from 25th Brigade were prepared with sufficient logistic support to advance to Nauro. It is hard to justify the delay in pursuing the Japanese, particularly with the Australian supply line at its shortest.

## Conclusion

Both Eather and Allen share responsibility for the events that resulted in the Australian withdrawal. Why Eather decided to attack Nauro when there was uncertainty about the ability of the Australians to hold Ioribaiwa Ridge is not clear. Even though Ioribaiwa Ridge had its limitations as a defensive position (as did Imita Ridge) which were emphasised by both Potts and Porter, it nevertheless had its advantages which Eather did not utilise (Kennedy 1992, 59). Eather's strategy at Ioribaiwa was high risk and Allen was mistaken in delegating the decision to withdraw to him.

Subsequently, Eather's tentative advance from Imita

Ridge gave the Japanese time to prepare in detail their delaying defensive positions at Templetons Crossing and at Eora Creek<sup>12</sup>. Heavy fighting at each of these locations meant significant casualties for Australian troops. It also placed an increasing burden on logistic support, particularly on rations, ammunition and medical supplies. There was also the accompanying need for medical treatment and casualty evacuation; and each additional day on the Trail in the oppressive environment meant there was a growing number of non-battle casualties in 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade<sup>13</sup>.

Because of the confused and short-lived defence of Ioribaiwa Ridge, the subsequent withdrawal to Imita Ridge and the slow and tentative advance north, it was not hard to see why senior commanders were concerned and frustrated at the progress of 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade. As well, there was little sign of 'offensive action' from the Australians, with the Japanese easily breaking contact and departing Ioribaiwa Ridge two days before the Australians discovered that they were gone. Equally, it is not hard to see why Allen's performance came under close scrutiny, leading to his replacement as Commander 7th Division in the days that followed.

**The Author:** This is Rowan Tracey's second essay on the Kokoda campaign. In the first (Tracey 2010), he analysed the 'established history' of the campaign and again found it wanting. He regularly treks along the Kokoda Trail leading groups for a specialist travel company, Adventure Kokoda. This article is the result of several ground reconnaissances he carried out at Ioribaiwa Ridge in October 2010.

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<sup>12</sup>These delaying positions gave the Japanese time to evacuate men and equipment and prepare their main defensive positions on the coast.

<sup>13</sup>Eather was well aware of this issue from the experience of 21<sup>st</sup> Brigade. He requisitioned a hygiene unit to operate with 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade, placing a greater emphasis on soldier's health (Sublet 2000, 93). When 25<sup>th</sup> Brigade was withdrawn from the battle at Templetons Crossing, they had lost 24 officers and 706 other ranks as non-battle casualties.

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