

THE MAKING OF *KOKODA FRONT LINE*

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Cinesound's *Kokoda Front Line* is undoubtedly the most famous newsreel made in Australia during the Second World War. The film won an Academy Award and made its cameraman, Damien Parer, a national hero. Despite lines like «the black skinned boys are white», which makes *Kokoda Front Line* producer Ken G. Hall wince whenever he hears it these days, I think we can all agree that the newsreel is brilliant propaganda.

We are in a unique position to study this film because strictly Parer was not a newsreel cameraman at all. He was employed by the Department of Information - the Australian equivalent of the British Ministry of Information. His footage was made available to both the main newsreel companies in Australia, Cinesound and Movietone, but remained the property of the Department. At the end of the war it was lodged in its entirety in the Australian War Memorial together with Parer's shot lists (or «dope sheets»). Consequently we can study the way both the Cinesound and Movietone versions were compiled.

Kokoda Front Line is quite independent of official government policy. Naturally Cinesound was subject to military censorship but Ken Hall was still able to take an individual approach to Parer's material. The only statement in the Department's files which discusses actual propaganda policy appears in a letter from Hall to the Secretary of the Department. The letter gives us a valuable insight into Hall's approach to *Kokoda Front Line*. He rejects the idea of telling «the man in the street» what to do or feel. Instead:

We want him to leave the theatre believing what he heard from the screen epitomised what he has been thinking himself all along. Create the ideal, make your subject think it is his ideal and you have got him where you want him.

And in *Kokoda Front Line* Ken Hall does precisely that. Nevertheless the main theme of the newsreel came from Damien Parer himself. When Parer returned from New Guinea he was ill with jungle sores, malaria and dysentery. Understandably enough he underwent a similar reaction to that of most frontline soldiers when first home on leave and confronted with the complacency of the home front. Hall vividly recalls Parer complaining about «girls going to dances» when men were fighting and dying a few hundred miles away.

As far as Parer was concerned New Guinea was Australian territory. His own parents had been living there when the Japanese invaded and had been turned into

virtual refugees. Parer's outburst gave Hall the idea of getting the highly photogenic photographer to introduce the newsreel on camera. Between them they drafted a suitable text which Parer delivered on camera with great sincerity.

Eight days ago I was with our advanced troops, facing the Japs at Kokoda. It's an uncanny sort of warfare. You never see a Jap even though he's only 20 yards away. They are complete masters of camouflage and deception. I should say about 40 per cent of our boys wounded in those engagements haven't seen a Japanese soldier - a live one anyway.

Don't underestimate the Jap; he's a highly trained soldier, well disciplined and brave and although he's had some success up to the present, he's now up against some of the finest and toughest troops in the world. Troops with a spirit amongst them that makes you intensely proud to be an Australian. I saw militia men fighting over there, fighting under extremely difficult conditions alongside the A.I.F. and they acquitted themselves magnificently. When I returned to Moresby I was full of beans; it was the spirit of the troops and the knowledge that General Rowell was on the job, and now that we had a really fine command.

But when I came back to the mainland - what a difference. I heard girls talking about dances and men complaining about the tobacco they didn't get. Up at the front they were smoking tea some of the time. There seems to be an air of unreality as though the war was a million miles away. It's not. It's just outside our door now. I've seen the war and I know what your husbands, sweethearts are going through. If only everyone in Australia could realise that this country is in peril, that the Japanese are a well equipped and dangerous enemy, they may forget the trivial things and go ahead with the job of licking them.

The introduction gives **Kokoda Front Line** its theme - the attack on the complacency of the average Australian and the celebration of the courage of the ordinary Australian soldier. But Parer skillfully takes this a stage further. Considerable tension existed between the militia battalions and the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.). The militia had been kept at home to counter any threat to Australia while the A.I.F. units had been sent to aid the British against Italian and German forces in the Middle East. Some A.I.F. officers appointed to the famous 39th Militia Battalion were openly contemptuous of the soldiers under their command. The men bitterly resented this. Especially when it soon became clear that the 39th Battalion knew more about jungle fighting than some of their A.I.F. officers who had just come from the Western Desert. By pointing to the superb battle records of the militia and indicating that they were worthy upholders of the ANZAC tradition, Parer was doing his best to defuse these resentments.

Another of the cameraman's contributions was the tribute to the commander of the Australian Forces in New Guinea, General Sydney Rowell. Here Parer was adroitly trying to influence military policy. American General Douglas MacArthur -

now in overall command of both the US and Australian forces in the South West Pacific - had savagely criticised the Australians' performance in New Guinea. Parer believed much of this criticism was unfounded. Worse still he had heard rumours that Rowell was to be relieved. Damien feared that Rowell was being made a scapegoat for MacArthur's and the Australian Commander-in-Chief Sir Thomas Blamey's abysmal ignorance of the realities of jungle fighting. MacArthur's and Blamey's neglect of New Guinea now appears even more culpable in the light of the recent revelation that the code breakers had given them a clear warning of the Japanese intentions as early as May 1942.

What's more Parer liked and respected Rowell. When the cameraman had been ordered by the Department of Information to return to Australia instead of accompanying the A.I.F. battalions advancing across the mountains to Kokoda, the General had covered for him. Parer always said that if it had not been for Rowell, there would have been no Kokoda film. Most important of all **Kokoda Front Line** directly challenged the view of the campaign contained in MacArthur's communiques.

The American's poor opinion of the A.I.F. and militia during the Kokoda retreat was expressed both in MacArthur's dispatches to Marshall and in his briefings to Australian reporters. This resulted in a number of newspaper articles criticising the Australian troops. Even the Australian victory at Milne Bay - Japan's first land defeat in the war - was down played. Rowell himself was acutely aware of the effect of all this on the morale of his troops. He knew that most stories were being filed from MacArthur's headquarters in Brisbane or from Port Moresby. This is why he had arranged for Parer and two of the best correspondents in New Guinea at the time, Chester Wilmot and Osmar White, to go forward with the A.I.F. battalions.

As a result Wilmot's broadcasts to the Australian Broadcasting Commission - our equivalent to the BBC - and White's articles for the Melbourne Sun newspaper and above all **Kokoda Front Line** itself gave a far more accurate portrayal of fighting in the New Guinea jungle than MacArthur's communiques. Subsequently this was recognised by both the Australian and American military. Just before General Eichelberger took over field command of the American forces in New Guinea he invited Parer and Osmar White to his headquarters and viewed **Kokoda Front Line**. On the advice of these two war correspondents Eichelberger ordered the American uniforms dyed a mottled jungle green.

The Australian army later bought 16mm prints of **Kokoda Front Line** as a training film. But by now Sir Thomas Blamey had relieved Rowell. When the Australian Commander discovered the troops were cheering the reference to Rowell he had the prints withdrawn and the section removed. But even though **Kokoda Front Line** is a considerable achievement, the newsreel obscures some facts about the Kokoda campaign. Parer recognised this himself. In a note I discovered in a collection of his film reviews, Parer wrote:

Unfortunately the newsreel considered it necessary to include some phony shots taken in the Salamaua area which were the only discordant notes in the film.

These «phony shots» are the exploding hut, the scenes of the soldiers firing at the trees and the tall commando firing the Bren gun from the hip. These were all re-enactments and noted as such on the dope sheets. To make this sequence look authentic, Cinesound's editor Terry Banks told me he «knocked out» a single frame to make it appear that the Australian soldier posing as a Japanese had been shot. (Banks never knew that the officer you see wearing the Japanese cap was killed in action shortly after).

Hall and Bank's treatment of this footage obscures just what Parer was doing when he filmed these sequences. He wrote on the original dope sheet, «these had to be staged as I arrived three days too late for the actual stoush.» (Australian slang for a fight). Here Parer is referring to the ambush of a Japanese patrol by a squadron of Australian commandos in July 1942. The so-called «phony shots» are the re-enactments of these events staged for Parer by these same commandos. He also included a re-creation of an incident that had occurred during a raid on Salamaua - a coastal town some hundreds of miles from the Kokoda Trail. This was the exploding hut which has appeared in many compilations since - usually mis-attributed. (I would like to emphasise that the events Parer was re-enacting took place in June - July 1942, they were filmed in July 1942 while the retreat from Kokoda was in August/September 1942).

I have spoken to many of the soldiers who took part in these recreations. They all say Parer did not «direct» them to do anything. Instead he asked the soldiers to act out events in which they had been involved or to show him the tactics they had used. Parer used these re-enactments to learn what had happened and to get it on record. He was quite open about these «re-creations». They were listed as such on the dope sheets and Parer alluded to the practice in a broadcast a few months before he was killed. However by using them the way he does in *Kokoda Front Line* Ken Hall makes it appear that these events took place on the Kokoda Trail. This is why Parer described the shots as phony. To his credit Hall later used the Salamaua material to make another newsreel which he called *War on the Roof of New Guinea*. This proved to be the accurate account of commando tactics Parer originally intended.

Equally fascinating is what has been left out of the newsreel. As the A.I.F. brigade was advancing across the mountains to reinforce the militia battalions fighting a rearguard action against the Japanese, the US airforce planes that were supposed to supply the Australians were bombed. Once again the Americans had parked their machines wingtip to wingtip just as they had at Clark Field in the Philippines. Without supplies the Australian Field Commander, Brigadier Arnold Potts, was unable to concentrate his forces and was forced to withdraw. This so-called «Retreat from

Kokoda» became one of the great rearguard actions in Australian military history. I should add most participants insist that it was not a retreat, it was «a fighting withdrawal.» However for Parer it was definitely a retreat.

Hall of course omits any mention in the newsreel that what he was showing was either a «withdrawal» or a «retreat». He left that to the newspapers. He did not know that Parer had filmed both the first aerial droppings and, most important of all, the burning planes on the airfield following the Japanese raid. These shots were suppressed for well over a year.

Even allowing for these omissions and distortions **Kokoda Front Line** remains a considerable achievement. Parer was able to demonstrate the problems of supply, the difficulties of the terrain and something of the tragedy and glory of Kokoda in little more than eight minutes of film. Nevertheless it is Ken Halls shaping of this material that gives **Kokoda Front Line** much of its impact. In Movietone's version of the same footage the individual sequences still look impressive but the newsreel lacks the impact of Hall's compilation. The difference is Damien Parer, himself. Hall and Parer were close friends and in the editing, and in writing the commentary, the Cinesound chief was able to build the film around the cameraman's response to the events he had recorded.

This makes **Kokoda Front Line** possibly the most uniquely personal of all World War Two newsreels.

SOURCES:

1. Material from Parer's diaries and letters comes from the Parer papers lodged at the Mitchell Library, Sydney, Australia.
2. Department of Information files are held by Australian Archives in Sydney (NSW) and Canberra (ACT).
3. Parer's unedited film and dope sheets are held at the Australia War Memorial Canberra (ACT) Australia.
4. The Cinesound and Movietone newsreels are held at the National Film & Sound Archives in Canberra (ACT). They are now in the process of being restored in the project «Operation Newsreel».
5. Wilmot diary and papers courtesy of Mrs. E Wilmot, UK.
6. Interviews with Ken G Hall, the late Terry Banks, the late Osmar White, Col. Ralph Honner, Victor Austin 39th Battalion, Roy Burbury 2/5 Independent Company and Mick Sheehan.