



'KOKODA': LOST AND FOUND ON THE TRAIL

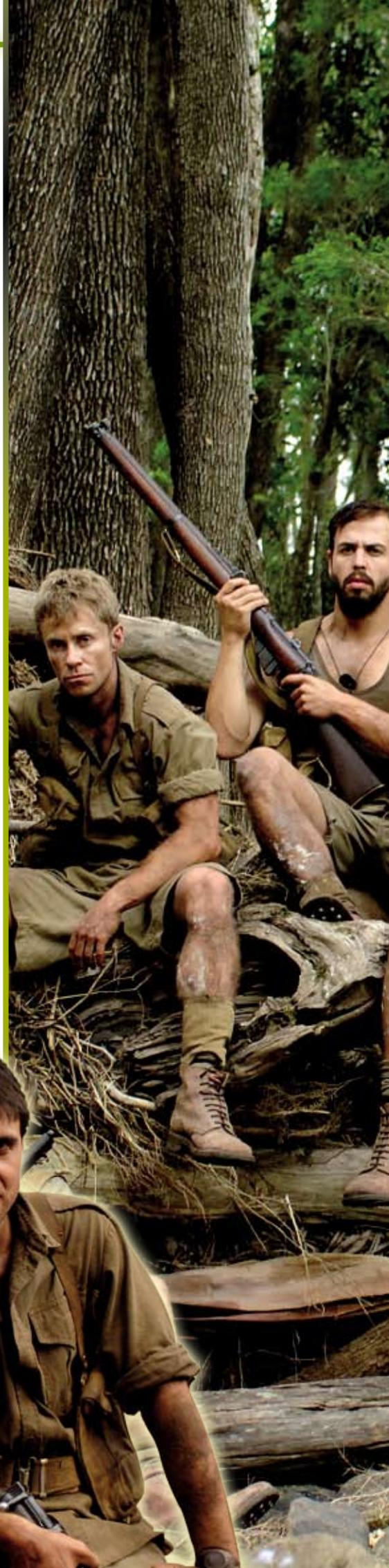
BY BRIAN MCFARLANE

TO AUSTRALIANS OF A CERTAIN AGE, AND EVEN TO SOME YOUNGER, THE 'KOKODA TRAIL' HAS ACQUIRED THE SHEEN OF LEGENDARY SIGNIFICANCE.

It is one of those place names that evokes not just a period – 1942 and World War Two – or a location, but resonates also with a sense of threat to Australia's insular safety, and to its plain insularity. The other associated echo is that of 'the fuzzy-wuzzy angels', a characterization that now takes the breath away with its paternalism and reeks of political incorrectness. Not then, though: back then and for years after, Australian soldiers spoke of the New Guinea natives who saved their skins with both affection and gratitude, in the decades before p.c. was invented, and when the Japanese threat to Australian shores was real.

For his feature debut, Alister Grierson claims his film, *Kokoda*, is 'based on a true story inspired by the Australian fighting spirit'. In spite of the bells his name might ring, he has not made a documentary but a genre film which will invite comparisons

that may not all be in its favour. As early as 1934 (and no doubt there are many similar films before that), John Ford made *The Lost Patrol*, in which unseen Arabs decimate a British patrol lost in a middle-eastern desert in World War One. Ealing's semi-documentary, *Nine Men* (1943), found the eponymous group, cut off from the battalion, defending themselves against the Italians in a Libyan desert fort. Leslie Norman's version of the stage-play *The Long and the Short and the Tall* (1960) dramatizes the tensions among a British patrol which captures a Japanese prisoner in the Malayan jungle





in World War Two. And in 1998, in Terence Malick's masterly *The Thin Red Line*, a US military platoon must take a hill held by the Japanese on Guadalcanal in Samoa. As well, there are echoes of one kind or other in such Australian films as *The Odd Angry Shot* (Tom Jeffrey, 1979), *Attack Force Z* (Tim Burstall, 1982), both set in jungle territory to the north of Australia, and *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir, 1981).

ROUGH TERRAIN

IN fact, *Kokoda* has a richer intertextuality than is good for it. This is an ambitious first feature and one doesn't want to be unduly severe about a film which has quite a lot going for it, but at the same time that, in relation to most of those films cited above, falls short in some key matters. There is no quibble about its fictionalizing a famous bit of Australian military history or of limiting its focus to a small group of about ten men who have been cut off from their battalion. They are not professionally trained soldiers, they are inexperienced and under-equipped, and their trek takes place in dauntingly difficult physical conditions, as they make their way south towards Port Moresby through the New Guinea jungle, emerging at its edge in a state of exhaustion, and worse, then being required to rejoin the battalion and go into action again.

Structurally, the film straggles. There is some attempt to give shape to the events by having the film start and finish in the area round a field hospital, presided over by Dr Shane Bourne. But John Lonie and Grierson's screenplay doesn't overcome the problem of trying to ensure that a perilous trudge through the



jungle over several days doesn't degenerate into the merely episodic. The film does capture some feeling for the grueling and boring arduousness of this, broken from time to time by a burst of action as the imminent enemy makes its presence felt. A string of events isn't a narrative; a narrative will normally need some kind of framework which might be the result of parallels and contrasts, and more awareness of dramatic rhythm than is on display here.

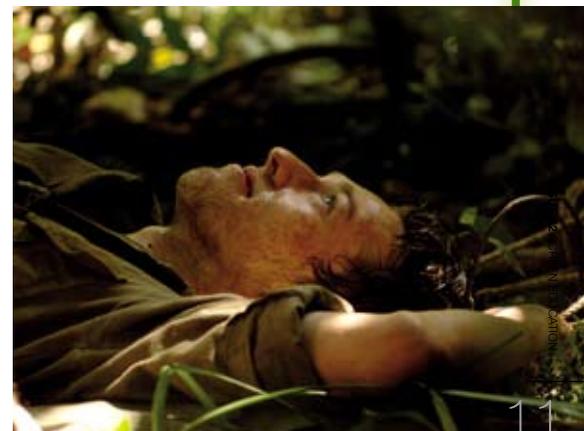
The screenplay seems to have recognized the importance of differentiating the characters of the group: there's Jack's sibling protectiveness for his younger brother Maz, who is wounded and has to be carried on a stretcher; there's rivalry over leadership between Jack (Jack Finsterer) and Darko (Travis McMahon, from TV's *Last Man Standing*) that leads to a physical tussle which lands them in a river; and there's a young guy with a bad dysentery problem which the film registers with unusual candour. However, the men aren't really drawn in enough detail for their differences to emerge as clearly as one would like. They are apt to be generalized types (the fresh-faced boy, the stropic cynic, the one with leadership potential, and so on) rather than individuals and this means that the relationships and tensions between them don't have the precision and texture that would rivet one's attention to the human elements of the tale. That said, I'd add that there's nothing much amiss with the acting; the actors, many of them new to me at least though some have plenty of television credits, just need a bit more to work on. They also look a shade too healthy for what they are meant to have gone through, with gleaming teeth and sturdy frames, though there's a moment of





authentically repulsive detail as one guy with a pair of tweezers pulls extraneous bits off his (tinea-infested?) feet.

The film's strength is in the creation of group responses, whether of laconic griping or of fears suppressed (dysentery as an outward and visible sign?), the sudden frisson of an unusual noise that may herald a savage attack. When the latter happens, it is not always clear what is going on, though a close-up of a bayonet being applied to someone's head is unambiguous. But it is also the case that in combat movies there is often confusion about who is doing what to whom, and in this case such unclarity is a product of the species of warfare it is. Instructions are shouted, men rush about, fearful but almost relieved to be doing something; the confusion is perhaps inherent in the action. It takes a great film such as *The Thin Red Line* (and no doubt a much larger budget than Grierson had at his disposal) to stage it in such a way as not to blur the details: I haven't seen Malick's film since its release, but can still recall its great swooping long shots and the brutally edited montages that bounced the eye from one detail to another in building up the whole horrific picture.



FORCES OF NATURE

TO return to the place itself. The Mount Tambourine area of Queensland stands in for the Kokoda trail, though some key crew members, including Grierson and cinematographer Jules O'Loughlin, spent time in Papua New Guinea to suss out the physical conditions, including matters of light quality and the effect of incessant rain, and this time has been well used. Director, cameraman and production designer (Nicholas McCallum) have recreated a powerful simulacrum of a wildly beautiful – and wildly inhospitable – terrain. From close-ups of very nasty-looking wounds the camera pulls back to fabulous shots of mist-shrouded jungle mountains or of a sudden, almost shockingly serene early evening sky. As in Malick's film, the most potent contrast in the film is that of disgusting things happening to people (often caused by yet *other* people) in a setting of surpassing natural beauty.

Early on, it is made clear that nature has no problem here; the local flora and fauna are perfectly adapted to the rain-soaked tropical beauty. Only man has stuffed up – and only white man. The open images of the film adumbrate this kind of ideological commentary. There are images of natural beauty, such as drops of water hanging on the ends of leaves, and the

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camera then moves to images of human detritus, such as a discarded toothbrush or field glasses in the mud or empty cartridge shells or a bowl of bloodied water. The fluidity of O'Loughlin's camera is exemplary in setting up and developing this ongoing contrast.

In this appallingly demanding terrain, no less so for being beautiful, it is true that certain character traits will be heightened, though as suggested earlier not really in sharp enough relief. A real positive of the

film is the way it creates so convincingly the sheer arduousness of the patrol's march. It doesn't spare the physical horror of near-drowning in mud, or of slithering perilously over rocks, or the remorselessness of torrential rain. In one of the film's most telling images, a man emerges from the mud looking for all the world like one of those bronze statues of fighting men one sees in the parks of Australian towns. Is there, I wondered, an instructive irony at work here? Is the most that can be hoped for as a memento of such hideous privations a monument that no one will ever look at seriously?

WE HAPPY FEW ...

SPEAKING of irony, I have a problem with the film's 'coda' in which the new colonel of the 39th battalion (William McInnes) addresses the ragged and battered revenants from the Kokoda trail before sending them back into battle. In a speech redolent of Henry V's St Crispin's Day 'band of brothers' sentiments, he tells them, 'I don't know you by name, but I know you... The battle you have just fought ... may just save your nation. The brigadier wants you to know your gallantry, courage and fortitude are an inspiration and I want you to know you are some of the finest soldiers I have ever seen. In years to come others will wish they had your conviction.' This

sort of rhetoric sounds great in *Henry V*, where motive is more powerfully rendered. Here, I'd like to think we are meant to hear the colonel's words in a spirit of irony on the filmmaker's part and perhaps we are: maybe the inserts recalling what the Kokoda trackers have been through are meant to be viewed contrapuntally with the colonel's voice which continues over them. And one doesn't mean to denigrate genuine courage either. Still, there is nothing in McInnes's imposing stance or delivery or in the apparent spirit of the listening

men to compel one to accept his words in the spirit of anti-war criticism. My real concern is that it is hard to know exactly how one *is* meant to read this scene. 'I am honoured to be your brother,' he announces as the straggling procession pushes through the mud. Are Grierson and Lonie – is the *film* – endorsing this celebration of military virtues?

It is unfashionable to applaud so openly virtues of courage and fortitude as revealed in time of war, and one may be unduly receptive to critique – and capacious if it seems to be missing. There are two other 'missing' elements. The enemy is scarcely seen: it is for the most part reduced to a fluttering of the foliage and this in its way is effective in maintaining the sense of threat. Odder still is the marginalization of the 'fuzzy-wuzzy angels': there they are at the four corners of a stretcher bearing Max (Simon Stone), and 'corners' is where they stay. It is of course the filmmakers' decision to focus on what they choose; it seems nevertheless white-centric not to give a little more time and space to these saviours.

Despite its Anzac Day release, it seems unlikely that *Kokoda* will catch on as *Gallipoli* did a quarter of a century ago. It lacks humour and it lacks a potent enough sense of relationships being forged in appalling circumstances. Though its predominantly youthful cast is more than competent, they haven't the material to generate the charged human drama of *Gallipoli*: when Jack and Darko finally come to blows, there hasn't been enough lead-up to make us feel this has been inevitable, and the 'kraut' and Catholic references to Jack and Max's background are too vestigial to anchor their lives in our minds. In spite of such misgivings however, *Kokoda* constitutes for Grierson a feature debut to be encouraged. Made on a modest budget, it often contrives to look and sound as if it cost much more; not too many neophyte directors would risk their arms so bravely.

Brian McFarlane, an Honorary Associate Professor at Monash University, is currently co-authoring books on director Michael Winterbottom and on the British 'B' movie •

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