



## THE KOKODA MIRACLE: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR ALISTER GRIERSON

BY CYNTHIA KARENA

**AFTER YEARS OF WATCHING AMERICAN WAR FILMS, AND SOME DAMNED GOOD ONES TOO, IT'S GREAT TO SEE AN AUSTRALIAN WAR STORY ON THE BIG SCREEN.**

**K**OKODA IS DIRECTOR Alister Grierson's first feature film, released nationwide on Anzac Day 2006. 'It's the seminal Australian story,' he says enthusiastically. 'It's so inspirational. It's such an addictive story – you read the books, get inspired, do the pilgrimage.'

The film is set around the Kokoda foot track in the mountain ranges of Papua New Guinea in 1942 during Australia's bitter and bloody battle with the Japanese. It was crucial for the Australians to stop the Japanese getting across the mountain ranges to Port Moresby, where they could mount an attack on Australia.

*Kokoda* illustrates well the argument for pumping money into the Australian film industry so we can tell Australian stories. The preview night I went to really brought home

how much Australians want to hear their own stories. Before the film started there was a buzz in the cinema. During the film even the publicist was crying, and afterwards you could hear people referencing the film to stories of their own fathers or grandfathers who fought in





Papua New Guinea or elsewhere.

*Kokoda* is the story of a small, inexperienced and ill-equipped platoon of Australian soldiers from the 39<sup>th</sup> battalion, who have been sent as a forward patrol into the mountain ranges that separate the Japanese forces in the north and Port Moresby on the south coast. 'They were a bunch of young nobody kids in the wrong place and the wrong time,' says Grierson.

*They were digging inside themselves and confronting their inner selves, and doing extraordinary things.*

*The story is based on one of the forward patrol that got cut off at Isurava [a small village in the mountains]. There were 500 Australians in the 39<sup>th</sup> battalion and 5,000 Japanese, who had no idea how many [Australians] were there. So the Australians gave the illusion that there were more by sending standing patrols one kilometre out to delay the Japanese attack.*

The Japanese troops were well trained and heavily armed, and after sustained attack the Australians were cut off from their supply lines. Alone in the jungle, tired and sick with malaria and dysentery, they made their way through the harsh terrain.

TOP LEFT: DIRECTOR ALISTER GRIERSON; ALL OTHER PHOTOS FROM *KOKODA* (PHOTOS BY JASIN BOLAND)

One of the things that struck Grierson was just how isolated the men were, and this echoes throughout the film.

*There is a repetitive theme of being lost in the jungle – groups, individuals or a battalion of 500 men. Our story is a metaphor for a broader concept. In a broad sense, the whole Japanese effort was to isolate Australia by taking Port Moresby.*

## WALK THE TALK

**G**RIERSON first became inspired by the Kokoda story after his brother came back from walking the track in Papua New Guinea. While there are many books on the Kokoda trail, it was basically an untold story in feature film.

*I'm a bit of a nerd; I read non-fiction rather than fiction. I read a lot of books. I've read at least twenty books on Kokoda. I talked to the 39<sup>th</sup> battalion veterans and I walked the track last year. We watched war and horror movies for three days, looking at how the colour palette, the camera and point of view are used. We*

**IT'S ABOUT THE MEN. THAT'S HOW WE GET TO THE HEART OF IT. NOT 'IN 1942 THE JAPANESE ATTACKED ISURAVA ...' HISTORY NEEDS CREATIVE PEOPLE TO SAY WHAT IT MEANS, NOT JUST WHAT HAPPENED.**

*also watched video games; gaming has moved into a more sophisticated world. It was about how to tell a story in a creative and inspirational way, rather than tell people historically.*

Peter Brune, who wrote *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes* (Allen & Unwin, 1992) and *A Bastard of a Place* (Allen & Unwin, 2005) became the film's historical advisor. He met the crew and actors, and was 'a great motivational speaker'.

But with all these facts, how do you stop the film from becoming a documentary? And why did Grierson decide against making a documentary?

*My mission isn't to inform, but to inspire. There is always a balance, but this film is not a documentary. That was the mon-*

*key on my back. I've succeeded if people want to learn more.*

*It was never about their [the 39<sup>th</sup> battalion's] individual stories, but using them as colour. But nothing is untrue in the film. The William McInnes character is based on a true character's writings. It's loosely based on real characters like Sam Templeton, an older guy in his fifties. There's a place called Templeton's Crossing on the Kokoda trail. Sam's sacrifice is based on true stories.*

Grierson wanted the veterans of the 39<sup>th</sup> battalion to meet with the actors, cinematographer, editor and other crew to infuse the project with a sense of reality, so everyone could understand that the subject matter was not make believe.

*We have a duty to represent this story in a profound way. It's an inspirational story, but it's a weight to carry. I was inspired by the story itself, and felt we had a responsibility to go there. It's a responsibility you take on.*

They were limited by scant financial re-

*shooting in the jungle for five weeks with rain, heat, snakes and spiders.*

*Creatively, it was important to have our own look for a Pacific theatre war movie. Not the Spielberg Saving Private Ryan (1998) look. The cinematographer shot on daylight stock and lit it with tungsten, which has not been done before. That created cool jungle hues and underscored the fear and anxiety.*

*We didn't score our battle scenes, like war movies normally do. We scored the moments in between to let the audience deal with their emotions.*

## THE GRAMMAR OF WAR

**C**ONSIDERING that it usually takes at least three to four years to get a feature film up, Grierson is amazed at how quickly it all happened. 'This time last year, there was no script, just a director's statement,' he says. 'It's the Kokoda miracle.'

Grierson co-wrote the screenplay with John Lonie, one of his lecturers at the Australian Film Television and Radio School. The story of Kokoda was so huge that he wasn't entirely sure how to take the essence of the ideas and fuse them into a story.

*I was a first-time writer and I was a bit afraid. It seemed like Everest – how are we going to do it? I wanted an expert to work with. I got the first draft of ninety pages from John. Then I looked at the structure and genre, and fused some of his fifteen characters into single characters. It has a horror grammar, but it's not a horror movie.*

Grierson gives an example of horror grammar: 'If a person is under threat, and we see the point of view of the threat as well as the person, this gives the audience more knowledge than the character, therefore there's tension.'

The creative team deliberately decided that the script had to be written with a small budget in mind. Even had he gotten more funding, Grierson maintains it wouldn't be a better film, 'just a bit grander and longer'. He's hoping a good response to *Kokoda* will put him in

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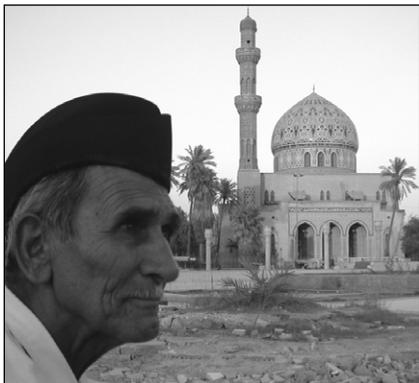
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## ABOUT Baghdad

DIRECTED BY SINAN ANTOON, BASSAM HADDAD, MAYA MIKDASHI, SUZY SALAMY, ADAM SHAPIRO

ABOUT BAGHDAD pays tribute to the people of Baghdad as they struggle to come to terms with the tragic fate of their beloved city. In July of 2003, exiled writer and poet Sinan Antoon returned to his native Baghdad with a team of independent filmmakers, artists and activists to document the effects that decades of oppression, war, sanctions and occupation have had on his city. *90 mins*

A JOURNEY INTO IRAQ AFTER THE AMERICAN INVASION, AS TOLD BY AN IRAQI REFUGEE RETURNING TO HIS HOMETLAND AFTER 10 YEARS IN AUSTRALIA.



## IRAQ, MY COUNTRY

A FILM BY HADI MAHOOD

Hadi Mahood has been living in Melbourne, having fled Iraq in the first Iraq war, a refugee from Samawa in Iraq's Shiite south. Watching the news broadcasts in Australia about the war in his country, he has many unanswered questions about the war and decides to return to the city of his birth, filming his journey and the many encounters he has along the way. *52 mins*

AN AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARY BY CANADIAN FILMMAKER, ERIC SCOTT, FOCUSING ON AN ISSUE WHICH HE SEES AS EMBLEMATIC OF THE WHOLE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT - THE ISRAELI MILITARY CHECKPOINTS THAT LINE ISRAEL'S BORDER AND ARE SCATTERED THROUGHOUT THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES.



## The Other Zionists

A FILM BY ERIC SCOTT

Scott's film is powerful and beautifully executed. The women at the heart of the film are committed and passionate. Together they have made a film that speaks eloquently about the nature of the conflict and the psychological effects of Israel's Occupation, both for Israeli's and for Palestinians.

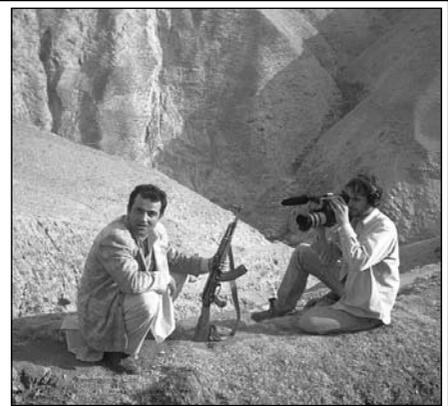
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A FILM BY TARAN DAVIES

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a much stronger position to ask for more money for his next project.

*It was a real challenge to get support and look for funding. We had an incredible response from the private sector, but the public funding bodies – one was effusive and loved it, 'this story must be made', another said it was boring, it should never be made, 'we know the outcome, everyone knows the end'.*

*That was a challenge – where were the surprises? But it's about the men. That's the important point. That's how we get to the heart of it. Not 'In 1942 the Japanese attacked Isurava ...' History needs creative people to say what it means, not just what happened.*

Courage, endurance, mateship and sacrifice are what the history of Kokoda means to Grierson. There are four pillars at the memorial site in Isurava, and each pillar has one of those words. 'Initially I wanted to fade to black, but felt like I had to wrap it up,' he says. 'When I was standing at Isurava – you can not stand there and not be moved by it. How do we make it about that?'

At the time of interview, the 39<sup>th</sup> battalion hadn't yet seen *Kokoda*, and Grierson was unsure how they would react to the film.

*It's not a documentary full of facts and figures. There's a huge generational difference – those guys are in their eighties and nineties. It's a very confronting film. It packs an emotional punch. It's inevitable they'll say 'he never said that' [or] 'they're too healthy'. The veterans visited on set at lunch (typically lunches on set are a feast) and said the actors looked too fit and healthy. But what can you do? You can't starve the actors.*

And, as Grierson points out, people now are bigger than they used to be, and even the biggest size shirt from that time wouldn't fit the smallest man today. The make-up department tried to compensate by making the actors look sick with the yellow skin that typifies dysentery and malaria.

Location was another potential problem in the realism stakes. It would have been too costly and arduous to film in the real

jungles around the Kokoda track, but they got lucky and found Mount Tambourine in the hinterland of the Gold Coast. Nevertheless, it was still a rural setting with cows wandering through paddocks and houses just out of sight of the camera. This forced them to film in a few tiny concentrated 'jungle' pockets in the Mount Tambourine area.

However, the actors' enthusiasm and motivation made up for any perceived lack of realism in either the location or their appearance.

*I was laissez faire in my direction, as they were so committed and so into it. We got them with ex-SAS guys in the bush with wooden guns out on weapons and patrol drills.*

*Casting is everything. I met the actor and then got more of a sense about the character. Some directors over-direct; it's a theatre thing. If you've got the right people, you motivate them and keep them on the right track.*

*I'd do six takes so I'd have more technical and creative choice. It's about hunting for options. I'd get them to try it a few different ways to give me more options in the editing room. I'd often use the actor's choice anyway. We had good actors. Jack Finsterer was a blessing. In all the noise and chaos he'd give me six different choices – he'd do a scene yelling, whispering, with a lot of fear, etc.*

Grierson is happy with the way the film turned out, 'I'm proud of it. It's a powerful and emotional story.' Two days before the initial screening for distributors, financial backers and others, the editor got Grierson to look at the last twenty minutes of the film.

*I watched and I was just floored. I just started crying. I don't know if it was the six months of the journey, the story, or the movie, but I just started bawling and couldn't speak. The editor came back into the room and starting laughing. But at the first screening the editor was bawling, everyone was bawling. There have been such profound reactions.*

Is this why he makes films?

*I can't do anything else. I studied economics in Japan and thought I just can't do this, what else can I do? My chances of being a professional footballer were slim. It's nothing at all like you imagine it. It's so tough and competitive. I gave up many times.*

But, while working as a manager representing writers and directors in film and television, he realized that he could do better, gave it one last go and applied to film school.

*My advice is don't do it, it's too hard. You've just got to make films, and be either incredibly lucky or gifted. You have to like it because other people won't give a shit. You need the four pillars – courage, endurance, mateship and sacrifice!*

Traditionally, filmmakers practised their craft in ads and television soaps. 'It's changed now,' says Grierson. 'The internet fame isn't the cinema screen, but ten by ten centimetres. Now there's punchy, imaginative filmmaking for mobile phones. It's horrifying for traditional filmmakers.'

## IT'S NOT ABOUT THE POLITICS, STUPID

**G**RIERSON grew up in a military family. His father was a Vietnam veteran, his grandfather was in Papua New Guinea, and his brother was in the Gulf War.

*I know that military people are the biggest pacifists in the world, as they know how grotesque warfare is. It wasn't an adventure, it was vile. All young men have a delusion about the experience of warfare. They are deluded because they are removed from it.*

*People may use the film as a political club for their own agenda, left or right, as you can interpret the movie any way you like. Does it oppose or support Howard's views? How do you deal with it? I'm steeling myself. No matter what you do, people will use and interpret it for their purpose. But it's not about that, it's about the story.*

*Cynthia Karena is a Melbourne-based freelance writer and researcher, and holds a Masters in Education.*

## From Perth Physiotherapist to Sydney Directing Success



**AFTRS Directing graduate Peter Templeman's** filmmaking career has gone from strength to strength since being accepted into the School in 2002.

His most successful directing project has been *Splintered*, written by Ian Irvine and produced by Stuart Parkyn while they were studying together at AFTRS. The film has won 14 awards at national and international film festivals, including Best Narrative Short at the Slamdance Film Festival.

Templeman followed this success up with *The Saviour* which has just won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Narrative Short at Slamdance – and eligibility to enter the 2007 Academy Awards®. The win marks the first time a filmmaking team have won the Grand Jury prize two years in a row.

The film recently screened at the Clermont-Ferrand Film Festival in France, acknowledged as the most prestigious short film festival in the world. It was a finalist at Clermont-Ferrand in the International Competition category.

Peter Templeman's previous three short films have won 23 festival awards between them, including 11 Best Films and five Best Director awards.



**Peter Templeton**  
Still from *The Saviour*

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