

Kienzle, Robyn, *The Architect of Kokoda: Bert Kienzle – The Man Who Made the Kokoda Trail*

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Ask most Australians about Kokoda and you will most certainly receive two responses. First, it was in New Guinea where Australian soldiers fought and turned back the Japanese and prevented the invasion of Australia. Second, the battle was fought in dense tropical jungle along a narrow mud splattered and steep inclining trail. On this last point many Australians might even express that they want to at some stage in their lives walk the Kokoda trail and emulate our soldiers. If you encounter someone who knows a little more about the Kokoda campaign you might solicit the response: “Oh yeah and the Fuzzy Wuzzys were there too”. This last reply is a reference to the native Papuan New Guineans who assisted the Australian efforts and without whom Australia would most assuredly have surrendered New Guinea to the Japanese.

Robyn Kienzle’s book is a long overdue biography of her father-in-law, Bert Kienzle and the important role he played in the Kokoda campaign organising the Fuzzy Wuzzys and keeping the trail open for the Australians as they fought the Japanese. By her own admission, the book “is not a military history” and that she is not “a historian”. Instead Robyn states that this is a book “about a man, how he became who he was, and what he achieved before, during and after the war” (p.5).

Bert Kienzle’s life is a fascinating one, and in many ways is a trek through the twentieth century, with nearly every major event impacting upon his family’s life. Bert was the son of a German father and a mother of mixed Samoan and British descent. Being born in Fiji, Bert and his siblings together with their mother were considered British citizens, while his German father became naturalised. But this status offered no protection from the panic which engulfed British born peoples of the Southern Hemisphere with the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Instead of being allowed to continue their lives in Fiji, Bert’s entire family were deemed enemy aliens. Their fate and many other German and Austrian peoples in this part of the world, was dispossession, transportation and incarceration to such remote places as draught stricken Bourke in outback NSW. Surviving four years of internment, little education, and destitution upon release, young Bert was sent to Germany to live with relatives. His entry as an adolescent into an economically devastated Germany and the creation of the Weimar Republic in the early 1920s are seemingly just another set of usual occurrences in his life. Yet, despite these events, Bert and his family became patriotically Australian.

But, it is the story of Bert’s return as an adult to the southern tropics and the establishment of his own rubber plantation and other enterprises in New Guinea where his legend hooks and reels in the reader. It is important to note that until the

mid-1970s, Papua New Guinea was considered Australian territory. So prior to the war many Australians lived in the jungles and villages operating their own homes and various businesses. Kienzle's presence in New Guinea and his pre-existing understanding and friendships with locals, gave the Australian military some footing to establish a working and logistical relationship, albeit not always favourable for the native peoples. This tension was most readily visible following the Australian's defeat at Isurava. In his diary, Bert described the atmosphere as being "the most terrifying time" for the "carriers who had already done such a sterling job." But after the battles with the Japanese, the native carriers were called upon to continue ferrying supplies up to the front lines but to also to "carry back the wounded." Each of these stretchers required "8 bearers." Bert told that in one period the Fuzzy Wuzzys carried a total of 42 stretcher cases using "336 carriers." (p. 151)

To use bold and colourful statements to describe Bert Kienzle's life would not do the man or his legacy any justice. Robyn has treated Bert's memory and character in a very warm and loving way, to provide the reader with a sense of awakening about a world not easily understood by people today. This was a world where ordinary people were left to make lives for themselves in the face of the upheaval, destruction and the devastation of wars, economic depressions and insane government policies. People like Bert Kienzle, the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels and Australian soldiers should be the first things to come to mind first when Australians think about and remember our nation at war, as well as our larger history both at home and abroad.

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