



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS BUSINESS**

**Kokoda Track**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 26 August 2002**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 26 August 2002  
**Page** 5569  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Billson, Bruce, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr BILLSON** (Dunkley) (1.10 pm)—I rise to not only reinforce the spirit of my friend and colleague's motion but also reinforce the fact that I seconded the motion. The motion before the House today is an expression of gratitude and symbolises this parliament's commitment to recognising the work and great achievements of Australian men and women and—as so eloquently outlined by the member for Deakin—those who aided them, as the 60th anniversary of the Kokoda battles draws near. Many will be reminded of it because of the Aussie rules match next weekend—where the mighty Richmond Tigers should give the Sydney Swans a whopping—which will be cause to prick the national conscience about this defining moment in our nation's history.

The New Guinea campaign is seen as a defining moment in our history, as the invincibility of the Japanese forces was first broken down during those times. In May 1942, the Japanese attempted to take Port Moresby by sea but were thwarted during the naval battles of the Coral Sea and also by the effects of the Midway battle. The Japanese decided to take Port Moresby in two approaches. First, they landed at Milne Bay on the south-east tip of Papua and were repulsed by the Australians with the aid of air support. The second avenue was over the Owen Stanleys; that caught the Australians by surprise, but we were ready to take it on. The 39th Battalion was ordered to cross the Owen Stanleys to secure an air base at Buna, 200 kilometres away.

Our troops were heavily outnumbered, poorly prepared and lightly equipped, so they withdrew to Ioribaiwa and Imita Ridge, where they faced difficult conditions, an extraordinarily difficult climate and unforgiving terrain. The Australian 39th Battalion was joined eventually by the 53rd Battalion and by the seasoned AIF infantry battalions of the 21st Brigade. Savage battles ensued, but the Australians started to gain the upper hand and the Japanese were unable to advance beyond Ioribaiwa. The Australians were reinforced by the AIF 3rd Battalion, the 25th Brigade, the Second First Pioneer Battalion and the 66th Independent Company. The suffering was huge: sleep deprivation, inadequate shelter, difficult climate, limited food and very restricted medical supplies. Troops carried 30 kilograms of equipment; they fought through constant wetness, tortuous terrain, and tropical diseases and fevers—malaria, hookworm, dysentery and the like. In that initial phase 600 Australians died and more than 1,000 were wounded.

Kokoda marked the turning point in the war of the south-west Pacific. The Japanese would no longer pose a direct threat to Australia. The member for Deakin has outlined the gallantry, and the great suffering that was endured in order to protect our nation. I believe his motion to properly recognise the heroes of Kokoda as we approach the 60th anniversary is entirely appropriate. The idea of a national memorial park is certainly something that needs to be worked through with the Papua New Guinean government, but I wholeheartedly endorse the member for Deakin's push to have some formal recognition of that part of Papua New Guinea as part of our national history and—as was mentioned by the previous speaker, the member for Cowan—part of our national sacred space.

There is master planning going on as a joint Australian-Papua New Guinean endeavour. Funds are being provided through the Australian government, and the support of the provincial government, through its personnel and infrastructures, is seeing that improvements and proper memorials are created. As the member for Deakin mentioned, funds are being made available for three particular memorials, and there was also recognition—through the visit led by our Prime Minister—of what a remarkable contribution Australians have made. The member for Deakin has also outlined the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel Scholarship Foundation and the contribution of Kelvin Templeton and the Sydney Swans in making sure that this date is not forgotten.

The member for Deakin also mentioned the heritage laws that are available now, where our nation can protect and recognise heritage that is actually in countries outside our jurisdiction. I believe it is important that this site, and also some of the areas that were traversed by the 58/59th Battalion, gain recognition. It could be embraced as a comprehensive package of heritage sites properly supported by interpretive signage and markers so that our heritage that was fought for, the blood that was lost and the national character that was created in areas of Papua New Guinea, highlighted by the Kokoda campaign, can be recognised and shared by all Australians. While the names of the AIF battalions are pretty much household words, few civilians have heard of the 58/59th Battalion.

I mention that as my grandfather served in that unit. It was one of the few battalions in the Australian Army to win all of the battles in which it was engaged during the war, and it should also be recognised as part of an integrated proposal. *(Time expired)*