

**L**ES Arnel was just 17. Hundreds of Japanese were marching towards him, across the Kumasi River, on their way towards Kokoda.

The Japanese Imperial Army had landed on the northern beaches of Papua New Guinea only days earlier and Les was part of the Australian Army's legendary 39th Battalion.

The motley crew of under-trained, underprepared and under-resourced soldiers had been sent forward to confront a rampaging enemy.

They were part of the first Australian platoon to set eyes on the Japanese in a campaign which would ultimately become etched in national military folklore.

Les and his platoon destroyed the Wairopi Bridge over the Kumasi and took up position.

He was on the far end of a tiny front line lying low in thick foliage about 10 yards apart in the gathering gloom.

"I got frightened and whispered loudly to the bloke next to me who I knew – but he didn't speak," says Les.

"I shuffled over to where he should have been but he wasn't there, so I shuffled down to the next bloke and he wasn't there, either, but I could see the imprint where he'd been laying."

Les hadn't heard the order to withdraw.

"I was really scared by now and then I looked back to see hundreds of Japs swarming across the river," he told the *Sunday Mail*.

"I didn't hang around ... I'm from Stawell and would have won the Stawell Gift (professional foot race) I ran that fast."

With pack, rifle and bayonet flailing, he finally caught up with his comrades a few kilometres along the rugged terrain of the Kokoda Track, where platoon leader Captain Sam Templeton ordered them to set up an ambush on the banks of Gorari Creek.

They were soon forced back again towards high ground at Oivi Plateau, where the troops attempted a permanent stand.

"I was shaking like a wet dog," Les says.

"I was lying there ready for the attack when, all of a sudden, as clear as you are now and just as close, my mother was there in front of me.

"She said, 'It's all okay, son, you're going to be all right'."

"It was so settling to see her. I was always close to mum. So mum disappears and, next thing, three Japanese faces popped up in front of me. They were real ... too bloody real!"

As Les fumbled for his rifle, the enemy disappeared as quickly as they had appeared.

"I reckon they got as big a shock as I did," Les recalled. "The Japs could never work out how many of us – or few of us – there were and were being very cautious, not wanting to engage until they could determine our strength."

The Australians retreated again but were trapped under intense, but inaccurate, mortar fire. A member of the Royal Papuan Constabulary, Lance Corporal Sanopa, came to the rescue.

"He was very nice, an im-

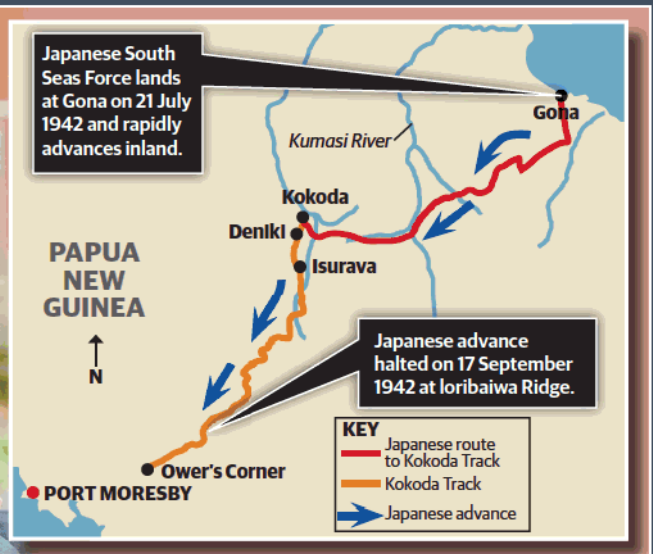
# The day a boy soldier faced the enemy

■ Etched in Australian history the village of Kokoda, in Papua New Guinea, is the site for one of Australia's most significant Pacific battles during World War II.

■ The end of the Kokoda Track over the Owen Stanley Ranges is where the Japanese were defeated for the first time on land. More

than 600 Australians died and 1600 were wounded in the campaign.

■ In the 75th anniversary year, CRAIG COOK speaks with the only surviving SA member of B Company about confronting the might of the Imperial Japanese Army – and then realising his mates had retreated without him.



pressive man," said Les. "He used to come around with lumps of sugar cane for us to suck for energy."

"Sanopa led us out under the cover of darkness down the plateau ... I wouldn't have done it in the light it was far too steep and scary."

"When we got down to the bottom we walked six hours in a creek (Eora) before reaching Deniki, above Kokoda."

"I remember we stretched out to dry, had a meal and a check-up and I then moved back to Kokoda where a battle royal took place on the end of the plateau."

"We were trapped in a rubber plantation with the Japs threatening to overrun us but a machine-gunner – Priestley was his name I reckon – with an offsideer with a tommy gun held them at bay the entire

night." That encounter became the First Battle of Kokoda – fought on July 28-29.

**B**ORN in Ballarat and raised at Stawell in country Victoria, Les joined the militia aged 13 in 1937 and, at the outbreak of war, signed up for the army two years later.

"They asked me my age and I just said, 'I'll be 18 in January'." "I was just a big kid looking for adventure. I saw all the lads in their uniforms with their guns and thought that looked a fun life. I'm disgusted to say that now."

"One of the captains was a bit unsure and asked my father, 'What age is that boy of yours?' Dad said, 'Well you should know, you took his application' and that was that."

Leaving school at 14, Les

worked in a drapers shop and when the war began in September 1939 headed to a permanent training camp.

He was first to raise an arm when they called for volunteers to form the new 39th Battalion and excited to be told they were "off to Papua New Guinea" – even though he had no idea where that was.

They sailed on the troopship *Aquitania*, from Sydney Harbour for Port Moresby, on Boxing Day, 1941. Les turned 17 on the boat.

Their arrival at Jackson Airfield – the primary Port Moresby airfield known as "7-Mile drome" to troops – coincided with continuous Japanese air raids.

"The natives always knew when one was coming because they used to clear out," Les said. "They sensed these things

better than we could." Les recalled that, on one occasion, the force of a mortar shell flung him from one end of a trench to the other.

The helmet hanging off his back smashed into the tunnel wall and he sustained severe injuries.

In another incident, the 12-person toilet – two rows of six bowls facing each other with a large trench between – copped a direct bomb hit.

"There was six weeks of shit splattered from one end of the camp to other," said Les, laughing at the memory.

**H**E wasn't laughing, though, on July 7, 1942, when, under the command of heroic former navy man, Captain Templeton, he was among volunteers for a mission with "no specific in-

structions" to become the first white men to traverse the Owen Stanley Ranges to Kokoda. The Japanese landed at Gona, on the north coast, on July 21, 1942, with the intention of crossing the mountains and capturing the capital, Port Moresby, from where they intended to attack Australia.

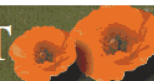
The members of B Company soon knew all about it.

"We were camped at Deniki and woke to the thunder of guns down on the coast at Sanananda bombarding the whole area," said Les.

"Runners (from the Papuan army) came back telling us the Japanese were on their way and had already made good ground."

So Les and his comrades were sent to confront the Japanese and fought against the odds to delay their advance,





**ORDEAL:** Les Arnel and other soldiers from the 39th Infantry Battalion, in Papua New Guinea (above); Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel Raphael Oenbari leading Digger George Whittington, who was wounded in the Battle of Buna as the Japanese stormed down the Kokoda Track (below right); and Mr Arnel relaxing at his aged-care home, in Hope Valley (left). Pictures: KERYN STEVENS, archives

including that famous first Battle of Kokoda at the end of July.

The Australians held the area but, with no reinforcements on the way, eventually retreated on August 10 back to Deniki and then on to the village of Isurava, which became the site of the largest, most desperate battle for survival by the poorly equipped battalion.

But Les missed the Battle of Isurava. By this stage, he was in intense pain, suffering malaria, amoebic dysentery, scrub typhus and abdominal pain which was later diagnosed as acute appendicitis.

Delirious, he wandered off into the jungle only to be rescued by two Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels - the name given by Australian soldiers to the PNG natives. They carried him back to safety.

Transported to Port Moresby a few days later, he was placed on a stretcher on the hospital ship, *Manunda*, bound for Brisbane.

That was the end of Les's war - but not his agony. His nerves were shot and he had a mental breakdown.

"I was offered shock treatment but refused it," Les said. "I said I'd fight it myself but it took a big toll."

**F**INALLY discharged in November 1945, Les returned to Stawell where he worked in the drapery and married childhood sweetheart Doreen Harper the same year. They couple had four children and moved to Port Pirie where Les managed several smallgoods stores.

Doreen died in 1974 and, married twice since, Les has

outlived all three spouses. He moved to the ACH Group Highercombe residential home, at Hope Valley, seven years ago.

Looking back on his time as a member of the 39th - the only unit to have Kokoda listed as one of its battle honours - Les, with failing eyesight, considers he's had "a lucky life".

"I lost my two best mates (Keith Worrell and Rex Curran) in PNG but I survived," he said.

"I haven't talked about this in ages - I hardly need to - but I sincerely hope the younger generations will never experience war in their lifetime."

**PAGES 26-27: THE HERO WHO NEVER CAME HOME**  
**PAGE 60: ANZAC DAY QUIZ**

