Let's mark the celebration by remembering the men who survived and died on the Kokoda Track in World War II. And the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels who succoured them, the Papuans whose legend still lives.

Paul Ham is the author of 'Kokoda'.

**Paul Ham**: The ordeal of the Australian wounded during the war in Papua in 1942 demonstrated the most astonishing mental and physical fortitude. It was an extraordinary self-overcoming by wounded men pitted against almost insurmountable hardships. Yet more than 1000 troops made this epic journey, by foot, or on the backs of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, through the jungle and over the mountains, along the Kokoda Track. This is their story.

At the battle of Isurava, the worst of the Kokoda Track, the Australian forces comprised 1500 men. Deployed against them were 6,000 crack Japanese combat troops. Outnumbered four to one, the Australians held this mountain fastness for six days against waves of Japanese attacks. Eventually the enemy strangled the Australian resistance, and our troops were forced to withdraw, south, back over the Owen Stanley Range. The question that deeply troubled the Australian commander, Brigadier Arnold Potts, was how?

Hundreds of the Australian wounded lay strewn on the jungle floor that night. It was August 30th, 1942. Somehow, as if by a miracle, these men had to get up and walk, or be carried out on the shoulders of native people, across 80 miles of razorback mountains.

The Australian evacuation of Isurava will never be erased from the minds of the men who endured. Through three days and nights of pouring rain, the walking wounded bumped and shuffled along the train from Alola towards the Eora Creek gorge, a six-hour journey across some of the steepest and most densely jungled sections of the Kokoda Track.

Those unable to walk, the stretcher cases, lay at Alola awaiting bearers, within range of Japanese guns. Stretchers were hastily constructed by torchlight. Medical
orderlies crept on hands and knees between the muddy stretcher lines, applying dressings and administering morphine. Bullets flew overhead. None of the wounded wept, recalled the medic Major Blue Steward. He confirmed the observation of the war correspondent Quentin Reynolds that 'The wounded don't cry'.

To help carry them out, fresh teams of native porters were sent up to the battle zone. These men were terrified; of 140 new carriers dispatched to Alola from Eora Creek that night, only 20 arrived. Many deserted.

Even so, some 900 brave native carriers were already doing the job of carrying out the wounded. It demanded immense endurance, courage and agility, and manpower. On 29th August, 42 badly wounded men were brought in 'requiring 336 carriers', according to one account.

The wounded crowded into Eora Creek Field Hospital, a few native huts and tents in a dripping jungle clearing. One side of the camp was set aside for the dead or dying; the other was for the operating theatre, a hut with a canvas awning, set in mud. Amputations were performed by torchlight; the surgeons worked through the night, kneeling over their operating tables, mere camp beds soaked in disinfectant and draped in blood-soaked sheets.

On 31st August, the Japanese advance patrols had scaled the high moss forest above the Eora Creek Gorge, and the hospital was ordered to evacuate. Medics swiftly packed up their most vital supplies. Doctors were told to stop operating - no more amputations, or fracture alignments - and only to stem blood loss in cases deemed absolutely necessary for the immediate of saving of human life. One medic, Captain Wallman, was busy amputating a man's hand when this order came through. He gave the wound a ligature and a new dressing, and sent the man and his half-amputated hand up the track in a morphine-addled daze.

Medics such as Magarey and Steward had the hellish job of deciding who must be carried and who should walk. A limb wound, unless exceptionally severe, was not deemed worthy of a stretcher. Abdominal wounds were written off as hopeless cases. The medics could only nurse these doomed youths, who lay whispering for their mothers or girlfriends before they expired in the jungle.

The walking wounded trudged across Eora Creek and up the steep bank towards Templeton's Crossing. It rained incessantly, drenching their bandages and reducing the trail to a mudslide on which they slipped and crawled in agonising confusion.
Some troops assigned to a stretcher refused it, and hobbled or dragged themselves up the track. Men with smashed legs and chest wounds were seen crawling from the hospital - so many leprous supplicants before the feet of a miracle-worker.

Private John Wilkinson observed sadly: 'The war would have been different if we'd had helicopters.' The great commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Honner later mourned the huge losses that modern technology might have averted that night.

The jarring journey over the mountains would take weeks. There were incredible stories of survival. One private, John Blythe, was literally riddled, shot in the chest, chin, back, right hand and leg. Steward bluntly told him: 'I've bandaged you up and you've got no chance of reaching Moresby. Goodbye.' 'Thanks very much,' Blythe cheerfully replied, and he was carried away. The journey took two weeks; he weighed 6-stone on arrival, half his normal weight. They amputated his arm on the way, but somehow he lived.

The troops' imperviousness to pain amazed the medics. Two corporals, Lindsay Bear, shot twice in his right leg, once in his left foot and once in the hand, and Russ Fairbairn, shot in the stomach - drove themselves unaided, back over the track. Bear's wounds had reduced him to a crab-like scuttle, so Fairbairn helped heave him over the mountains to Myola.

But these were the walking wounded, the relatively fit. What about the stretcher cases?

They lay in the mud at Eora Creek on 30th August, in danger of being surrounded and massacred by the enemy. There were not enough carriers to carry them out.

Rupert Magarey addressed these last few besmeared faces blinking up from the mud. He demanded of them the impossible: 'I want every man who is capable of walking ... to start off for the top of the hill', he said. 'This place must be cleared tonight.'

'Like slave drivers we urged them on, some hobbling, some staggering like drunks,' remembered Steward. 'They slithered, crawled and clawed their way through the mud, faces twisted with effort. Men can rise from dreadful pain to superlative heights ...' he wrote.

About 200 yards up the southern slope, several carrier teams, terrified by the encroaching fire, abandoned their wounded on the track. The patients lay there,
dazed and staring into the darkness. Australian troops ahead ran back to retrieve then, grabbing the hewn handles of the stretchers by torchlight.

All but three stretcher cases were evacuated from Eora Creek that night. These badly injured men, two with abdominal wounds, one with a sucking chest wound, were given up for dead. Later, a medical patrol returned and found one of these men miraculously alive. The youth opened his eyes and pleaded with an officer, 'You're not going to leave me here sir? I won't be left behind?' The boy lived for several days on the shoulders of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels.

The legendary Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels. Who were they? Havala is probably 76 years old this year, but he may be older. He's not sure. Havala lives in the village of Kagi, in the Central Province of Papua. Sixty-four years ago, aged perhaps 14, he carried his first wounded Australian over the Owen Stanley Mountains.

Havala was possibly the youngest Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel on the Kokoda Track. Today he's happy to discuss his memories standing on two broad, flat, roughly calloused feet.

'When the Australians were wounded we took them from here to Owers Corner', he said, casually waving a hand across the mountain range. 'We took off their bandages and rubbed their wounds with bush medicines. And then we wrapped leaves around their wounds. That made them feel better. When a wounded soldier died, we'd bury him on his stretcher.'

Havala was one of about 3,000 tribesmen needed to carry out the Australian wounded and feed and arm the troops. They shunned the standard army canvas stretchers, which rotted and tore. They made their own by doubling a blanket around two long pole and tying the edges together with native string.

Many were indentured labour - virtual slaves - and not willing volunteers. But there is another side to the truth, which befits the angelic legend. At his best, the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel literally saved the lives of hundreds of Australian soldiers.

Many felt a deep personal responsibility and affection for their human cargo, and close friendships developed Fuzzy Wuzzies and Australian wounded.

Though sure-footed, the Fuzzy Wuzzies could not avoid jolting their heavy passengers. Sometimes, the stretchers collapsed; or the carriers slipped. The pain was extreme and soldiers passed out. With every jolt, blood seeped from wounds
and stumps. Amazingly, few of the stretcher cases died from blood loss, such was the care with which they were borne over the rivers and steep slopes.

One soldier, Hamlyn Harris witnessed the stretcher-bearers 'picking their way ... softly and silently ... handling their stretchers with surprising deftness in rough places, to save their human burden the slightest jolt ...' No amount of care could ease the pain of horribly wounded cases, but a surprising number survived the journey through mud and slush. The rhythm of the movement even rocked some men asleep.

At night the Fuzzy Wuzzies slept four to each side of the stretcher, in a protective ring, and assisted the patient's every call and need: 'The natives practically never left the patient until they had brought him to his destination', said Magarey.

Their devotion had a Christ-like simplicity, and the wounded rewarded their carriers with tears of gratitude and gifts when they reached the end of the journey.

The stretcher-bearers felt a deep sense of personal loss if their patient died, such was the bond formed over the mountains.

We were very, very sad when we saw the wounded Australian soldiers,' said Havala. 'When a patient died, we were tearful', he said. 'We sat down by his stretcher and cried for him. And then we buried him', said one Fuzzy Wuzzy of his dead Australian passenger.

By the end of the first week of September the long file of walking wounded was strung out for miles over the Owen Stanley mountains, like the creeping queue at a soup kitchen. All night, Osmar White, the reporter, and the photographer Damien Parer passed lines of dazed troops.

They shuffled at a snail's pace, holding onto each other in long pitiful strings ... They kept sorting and re-sorting themselves,' White observed. The stronger overtook the weaker, and at the end of each 'string' men would 'drop off and lie face down in the mud. Some died there, some recovered, and joined the tail of another string.' Others collapsed on 'pyres of heatless embers', the phosphorescent fungus that grew along the track, whose light they found heartening.

Of all their torments, the darkness was peculiarly disturbing; night in the Owen Stanleys is so dense you imagine you can touch it. Preying on their minds was the thought of the enemy in the jungle behind, and some men reverted to a childhood
horror of the ‘chasmic blackness’. ‘Tell them to send a light down the trail, will you? Tell them to send a light!’ one plaintive voice cried out one night.

Osmar White produced an old torch, and a line of wounded 100 yards long formed up behind him. Now and then he flashed the light back down the line, and the team shone over the troops. One, White noticed, was shot twice in the chest; the next soldier had shrapnel wounds in his forearm and thigh. White's battery lasted two hours, flickered out, and the wounded vanished in the enveloping darkness. The soldier with the chest wound lay down, mumbling, 'I'm pretty tired. I think I'll wait till daylight.'

White, a pretty hardened reporter, lost his composure at this sight. 'I gave him a nip out of my brandy flask ... and he was asleep, lying in the arsenic weed ... I started to cry ... Now there was no light. The line fell away, disintegrated. I was alone.'

On 9th September, about 200 wild-looking men shuffled into Ilolo near the start of the Kokoda Track. They were skinny, hungry, dirty, unshaven, dressed in rags, some without shirts or trousers. All were wounded. All had dysentery. Fresh troops preparing to march off over the mountains, 'just stood and stared at us', said one. These survivors of the 29th battalion, who'd been fighting the Japanese in the mountains since July, stripped, threw their rags onto a bonfire, and took a glorious wash in the river.

Soon, the stretcher-cases came in They were transferred to field hospitals, and later flown back to Queensland. The 2/9th Field Hospital had 600 beds in October. By December it would hold 2000 patients, so overcrowded that stretcher cases were slid under bunks. Sister Murie was solely responsible for 120 patients, of whom 40 to 50 were very ill or seriously wounded.

In the eyes of returning troops, these pretty young nurses were visions of angels descended 'To them, it seemed as though we were Heaven-sent', said Sister Murie, aged 20.

The troops were given a while to recuperate. Many were sent to the stinking 'Lightning Ridge' Dysentery hospital, where each man was issued on arrival with a baked bean tin in which to pass his daily sample.

Within weeks, most of these men would be sent back over the mountains to fight - and die - at the battle of Gona.

Next week, Ockham's Razor is presented by Brian Sherman, who talks about those voiceless animals.

I'm Robyn Williams.