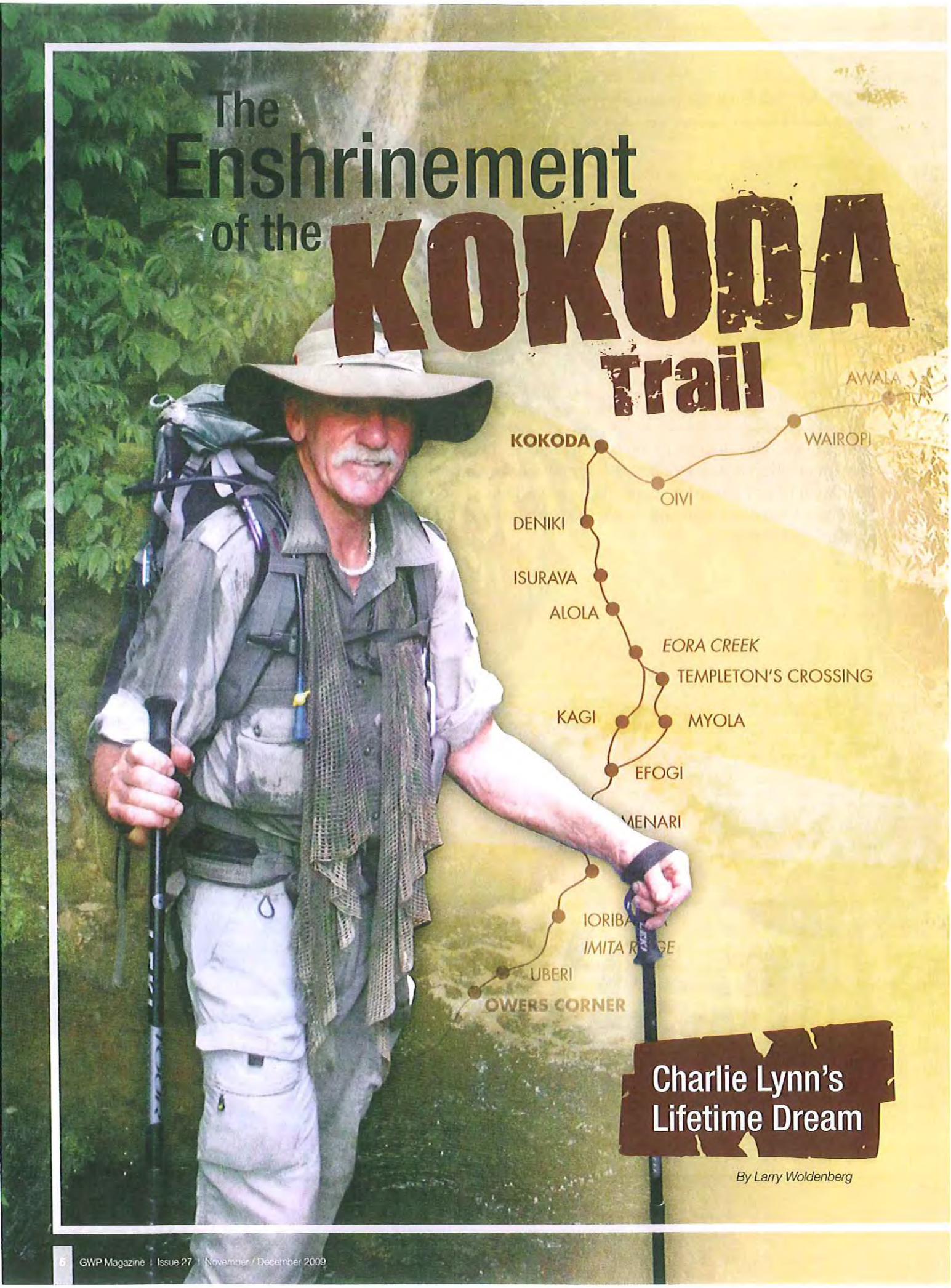
The Enshrinement of the KOKODA Trail



Charlie Lynn's Lifetime Dream

By Larry Woldenberg

After serving 21 years in the Australian army, Major Charlie Lynn was invited to organise a race over the Kokoda Trail in 1991. Seeing its abandonment and neglect over 49 sad years, Charlie was moved to do something about it. This was a pivotal moment and he has since never looked back.

"Actually, the race never took place," Charlie explains. "In fact, I couldn't find a single sponsor. Though today it's hard to believe, back then people knew nothing about the Trail. There wasn't even an existing map. This woke me up to the fact that our school system lacks any content on Australian military history. It's all written from an American and European perspective with a left-wing orientation to boot. It's almost as if we're ashamed of our heritage. Yet the Kokoda Trail embodies everything good about Australian history."

Let's go back in time for a moment to get a clearer picture of what Charlie is describing. It's July 21, 1942. Japan is desperate to get a foothold in what was then New Guinea. They had just landed on the northern coast and were intent on marching over the Owen Stanley Ranges to capture Port Moresby. They could then go on to invade Australia.

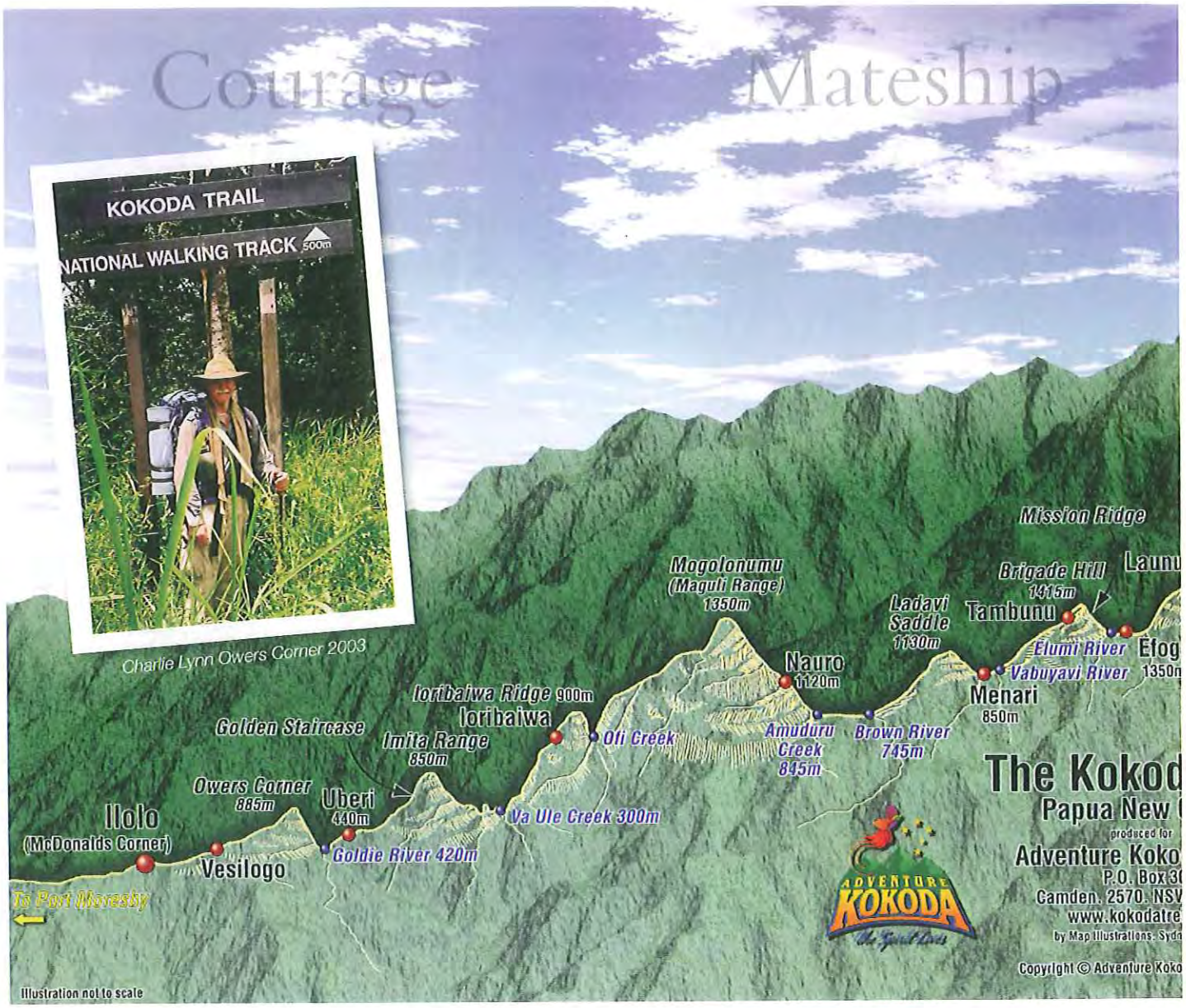
At that time Japan had a Shinto-led, militaristic regime. Contained on an island, they needed more resources to fight the war. Pearl Harbor had already occurred and the US Navy was successfully engaging the Japanese in two famous sea campaigns — The Battle of the Coral Sea and The Battle of Mid-way. So the only way to capture Port Moresby was to cross New Guinea by land.

This is where the Kokoda Trail comes into play. As Charlie Lynn recounts: "The trail is just a way of connecting up to 10 disparate villages made up of 100-150 people each and containing 4-5 clans in every community. There was no unifying governmental system and the country's populace spoke literally hundreds of different languages.

"When the first engagement with Australian troops occurred on PNG Remembrance Day, July 23, 1942, our troops were primarily composed of un-trained militia. Our regular troops were in Europe. We were outnumbered 6 to 1 by over 10,000 Japanese troops.

"This resulted in a strategic withdrawal as our diggers positioned themselves to slow the advance while reinforcements were called for. Historians can argue that it was Australia's most significant campaign of the Second World War.

"It was the first time Australian territory had been invaded by a superior, fanatical enemy force with the bombing of Darwin and a submarine attack in Sydney Harbour. Some



of the first diggers to meet the enemy on the Kokoda Trail were only 18 years of age. Our politicians had been caught napping," Charlie lamented.

"The jungle forced hand-to-hand combat and eventually we drove the Japanese back from just 48 kilometres short of their objective at Port Moresby. It was a desperate situation involving the highest degree of heroism from our forces.

"So you can imagine how shocked I was to see the state of things in 1991. Unable to organise a race of any kind over the Trail, I decided to walk it myself and engaged a native Koiari who didn't even speak English to be my guide. At the time there wasn't even a single sign denoting the Trail. There was nothing but the bare outline of a trail long overgrown in many places. Most of the battlesites had been bypassed and reclaimed by the jungle. Armaments were left to rust in peace.

"Now it was 5 years since I had emerged from my career in the Army, and I had considerable experience organising all kinds of endurance races both in and out of the military. I, myself, had been a marathon runner. In fact, I organised the longest and toughest marathon in the world for seven years — the Westfield Sydney-to-Melbourne Ultramarathon that Cliff Young made famous.

"So after I walked the trail, I decided with my wife, Jill, to form Adventure Kokoda and lead expeditions for more Australians to experience living history. As it turned out, for the first 10 years I had to beg people to go. We averaged maybe 20 people a year. Today we're knocking people back. But there has been a lot of work in between.

"I remember drawing the first map of the Trail myself using an altimeter and charting all the ridges. Eventually I hired a cartographer.

"Our first real break came in 1996. Channel Nine wanted to do a story, so I took a group of celebrities on a trek. The list included Angry Anderson, Collette Mann, Grant Kenny, Darryl Braithwaite, Dr Kerryn Phelps and Shelley Taylor-Smith. The resulting documentary footage had the highest rating in the history of Current Affairs as it aired on ANZAC Day of that year.

"Today some 6,000 people a year do the trek with 30 odd trekking companies offering their services ranging from fair dinkum Aussie firms to backyard guides. Only about half a dozen of the companies are reputable. Many have no one trained in first aid or expedition leadership and some don't even

carry communications equipment.

"The actual length of the trek is 130 kilometres. You need to allow 10 days if you want to take in the history and not bust your gut. The best times to go are during the dry season from July to November. You can expect an average temperature of 30° C with humidity even in the dry season.

"There has been a lot of adverse publicity over the recent deaths of two Australians. One was on our recent trek. Our leader recognised his plight in the first hour of the expedition and made arrangements to escort him back to a waiting vehicle, but he suffered a heart attack enroute to hospital. We do our best to advise people of the rigours of the trail and while we have a very stringent medical clearance regime, we expect them to train hard and prepare themselves. Most do. Even though we have led more than 4000 Australians safely across the Trail over the past 18 years, the first fatality still hits you hard.

"I myself have made the trip over 56 times, so I certainly am aware of its difficulties. But on a more positive note, I've also observed that people grow in their appreciation of the actual conditions under which our troops laboured. Our trekkers definitely report back to us an increase in spirit from conquering adversity and a better understanding of both self and others as a result. People bond incredibly and you can generally notice a positive difference after they return.

"Two people reporting such life-changing experiences were Brett Kirk and Leo Barry of Sydney Swan fame. Their AFL careers were shot in 2001 before they trekked Kokoda. A couple of years later they were the only two Swans selected in the All Australian squad.

"One side effect of all of this is the effect on the Koiari and Orokaive people along the Trail. Once I started trekking I realised I was their hope for a better life, because they were existing in a poor subsistence economy. The employment we provide has been a major boon to the area. The last two years we've taken over 1300 people across the Trail. While we have 6-7 expedition leaders (mostly ex-military men), we provide temporary work to more than 2000 PNG guides and carriers who establish a special relationship with the trekkers they support during their trek.

"In addition our trekkers have taken it upon themselves to donate more than 2400 new books to the Port Moresby Grammar School library. We have established a Kokoda Bursary Program at the school and provided

Charlie Lynn near the Brigade Hill battlesite on the Kokoda Trail

people who live along the Trail. They live within a subsistence economy but are always cheerful and ready to lend a hand to struggling trekkers – just as their grandfathers, the famous 'fuzzy-wuzzy angels' did for our diggers.

"Meanwhile, we are in the process of establishing a special Network Kokoda Foundation to provide assistance in a more substantial way and would welcome any ideas or offers of support," Charlie comments.

Charlie's dedication to Papua New Guinea partially comes from his humble rural background. He was raised in the small country town of Orbost located in the Shire of East Gippsland, Victoria. Its 2006 census shows a population of 2452 and its primary industries are beef, dairy cattle and sawmilling. More recently, tourism has become an important industry as Orbost is the major town close to several national parks including the Snowy River National Park.

"I don't know how Dad and Mum made out with 8 kids in a 2 bedroom house. Dad was both a farmer and a truckie. Someone had to help out, so I left school at the age of 15 and started working for Dad. He brought an old red Commer Pug nose truck and became the local carrier. As kids, we didn't take a lot of notice of all the work, but once we started helping out we began understanding the meaning of the words 'hard yakka'.

"There were 500 butter boxes three times a week to load and unload along with groceries for the stores, grog for the pubs, cement for the brickies, fuel, produce and livestock to local farms, the railhead at Bombala and the markets in Melbourne. If it could fit on the back of the truck, we hauled it. And all Dad had was a trolley, a bag hook and a couple of planks!

"I still don't know how he did it full time for all those years because it is the hardest work I ever did. Still, he wasn't the only one committed to hard physical work in the town in those days, so when I think back I can understand why he had to go to the Mens

Adventure Kokoda trek group in moss forest near Mt Belamy

them with an abundance of sporting gear and other items. Plus we donated two computers to Tessie Soi's PNG 'Friends Foundation' together with financial support for the wonderful work she does.

"We have also provided financial support to the Buk Bilong Pikannini program for children in the Tuberculosis Ward at the Port Moresby General Hospital. Along the track our trekkers have donated approximately $50,000 in medical supplies to the Kokoda Memorial Hospital and more recently to the Sogeri Health Centre. Furthermore, we provide school books and sporting gear to villages along the track.

"We are proud of our association with PNG and in particular the Koiari and Orokaiva

Club to whet the whistle with his mates before he came home for tea each night."

Charlie worked with his father for a few years before going to work building roads for the Country Roads Board. He had to live in camps, so every weekend he and his mates hit the towns where they spent their weeks' wages.

"I was caught in this work/play cycle until the Army conscripted me in 1965. Since then I spent time serving in Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, and the US. While at Fort Lee in Virginia I was appointed Captain of the Parachute Display Team and completed 200 jumps", Charlie recalls.

Then, upon returning to Australia, he attended the Army Command and Staff College in Fort Queenscliff. He commanded a Squadron of army wharfies known affectionally as 'termites' and was later a senior staff officer with the 1st Brigade at Holsworthy. It comprised around 4000 men and was commanded by Brigadier Michael Jeffrey who later became Governor-General of Australia.

When Charlie emerged from the Army he then got into organising international ultra-marathons, caravan safaris around Australia, special events, survival training for mining companies and expeditions across the Kokoda Trail. Eventually the Liberal Party acquired his services and he ended up representing Southwest Sydney in the Upper House. His area extends from Auburn to Granville to Picton. He is now entering his 15th year as an MP.

Naturally, his special expertise is in PNG and the Melanesian region - the 'arc of instability' to our immediate North. "There has been a widening empathetic gap since we virtually abandoned them in 1975. Introducing Melanesian studies into our education system and giving them access to our seasonal markets would be great way to reverse this trend," Charlie adds.

As a returned Vietnam veteran, Charlie also shares concerns for all our Australian war veterans. "I was shocked by the way our Vietnam soldiers were betrayed by our own people when they returned from the war. Many were told to change out of their uniforms and shunted out the back of the airport. I support the freedom to protest, but it should have been directed to those who sent them to war, not to those who were sent. They were just doing their duty as our veterans did before them at Gallipoli, Tobruk, Kokoda and Korea," Charlie points out.

Charlie Lynn with a wartime Ford Trimoter aircraft he recovered from Lake Myola in 1979 as leader of an army helicopter rigging team

Charlie Lynn and Cr Angelo Tsirekas with City of Canada Bay trek Group at the Isurava Memorial

Climb out of Yodda Valley

You would have to look long and hard to find a person who better serves Australia and the Melanesia area or, for that matter, who so personally affects the lives of so many trekkers. Charlie Lynn is not only extremely personable when you meet him, but is also a real inspiration to Australians of all ages. *Business Resource & Lifestyle Magazine* salutes one of Australia's greatest contributors to our National Heritage. Well done, Charlie Lynn.