



How I survived

□ FIFTY years ago this month, a handful of young Australian Diggers recaptured the village of Kokoda — the most important symbolic achievement of the New Guinea campaign — after more than three months of bitter fighting across the notorious Kokoda Track. Our Diggers had absorbed everything the seemingly invincible Japanese war machine could throw at them; although

ill-trained, overwhelmingly outnumbered and outgunned, they contested every inch of the rugged terrain and eventually fought the Japanese to a standstill — little more than a day's march from their objective, Port Moresby. The Diggers turned the tables and, with great fighting spirit, forced the Japanese back across the mighty Owen Stanley Range and into the sea in a series of

heroic battles. The Sunday Telegraph joined a special remembrance walk across the treacherous Track — an arduous nine-day hike, retracing the steps of those "ragged bloody heroes", from Ower's Corner in the south to Kokoda in the north, finishing on November 2 — 50 years to the day after Kokoda's recapture. It was an epic journey to recapture the spirit of Kokoda.

Gut-wrenching slog honors youthful Diggers' valour



By SALLY MACMILLAN

A motley mob are we, this Charlie Company. A sombre group of strangers wandering through the eerie still of the Bomana Cemetery, 12km out of Moresby, the war dead at our feet — 3400 young Aussies, average age 18 and a half. Just boys.

You shiver in the searing heat. Eight of us are raw recruits, soft urban sloths. Seven of us Naive Novices will make it through. Others are made of sterner stuff — a cluster of Wonder Trekkers, seasoned bushwalkers, a marathoner, a crayfisherman.

The Veteran stands in a class of his own. Les Cook, 70, a 17-year-old volunteer in the 2/14th Battalion on Kokoda. His return is a special mission of remembrance. Les will put us to shame with his endurance, his wit, his stubborn pride. Asked if he wants a porter, he snorts: "I'm only 70, not 90." He carries his pack to the very end.

The "boys" — our Koiara carriers, sons and grandsons of the famous Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, most from the enchanting village of Naduri. Masters of their jungle environment, they carry the food, the tents, the Naive Novices' packs. They become our very own angels, nursing us up and down mountains, jollying us with their sing-song teasing. It's a wrench when we leave them.

Last but not least, our fearless leader: Charlie Lynn, RL, retired army major; Viet vet; experienced adventurer with detailed knowledge of the war campaigns here; organiser of the annual Sydney-Melbourne ultra-marathon; qualified HALO (high-altitude, low-opening) military free-fall parachutist; former NSW ultra-marathon record holder. The man who will become father, mother, nursemaid, motivator, succourer and packhorse to us.

We begin what was to become a seemingly never-ending journey on the track that is truly "the devil's design".



Another exhausting, seemingly endless ascent into the clouds

DAY ONE: OWER'S CORNER:

The Wonder Trekkers are champing at the bit, shoulder-twitching perfect packs in impatience.

We Naive Novices are woefully slack. She Whose Foot Has Never Left Concrete is wrestling with her designer yellow-and-blue Gore Tex gaiters — the nifty but unwieldy little gadgets fashioned to thwart such jungle nasties as stinging nettles, grass spears and leeches. The Mosman moderne nearly faints at the description of the bloodsuckers' modus operandi.

The signpost is a Papuan New Guinean compromise: "The Kokoda Trail — National Walking Track". Les won't have a bar of the Yankee "trail". "It was always the Track — accompanied, of course, by a string of adjectives." We get to use them all.

Our first inkling of the purgatory ahead comes as we stumble and slither down to the Goldie River. We ford and collapse breathless on other side. The Wonder Trekkers are up and gone.

Two hours later, when the last of the stragglers are in and fortified by the chicken noodles that will become our mainstay, we set off, on and upwards only to gape in breathless horror at the daunting sight of the razorback spur on Imita Ridge — a skewed, intimidating monstrosity with its Golden Staircase, our first stairway to hell.

Imita Ridge was the last bastion of defence for the young Diggers. The Australians had managed to get their 25-pounder guns to fire over the ridge into Japanese positions at Ioribaiwa. Until that stage, the Japanese had far superior weapons. The Diggers, armed only with Brens and Thompson sub-machine guns, had been forced to fight them at close quarters. When the Aussies got here and

heard those 25-pounders firing over their heads on to the enemy positions, it was music to their ears.

The Golden Staircase, an army-built obstacle course of several thousand logs pushed into the ascent, putrid mud forming the rest of the step, a stop-start horror of a climb for the Diggers. The "steps" are long gone. Not so the exhausting grind of ascent along a knife-edge spur. Mutters of mutiny break out at the top. Les collapses. He fears he will not endure.

Cresting this monster holds little joy as you plunge down the equally steep and exhausting descent into the fringe of the fetid forest and over treacherous tree roots. By now, we are hours behind schedule, slogging through pouring rain. The mob is strung out — and sprawled face down — on the Track, Charlie bringing up the rear. Darkness is falling as we slither in terror along the boulder-strewn Uaule Creek.

We stumble into our bush camp to find the Wonder Trekkers clean and dry, writing up their diaries by torchlight. An hour and a half later — 17 hours after reveille — Charlie Company is all in. Some of us can't eat. We whimper, lick our wounds — blisters are already devouring feet — and collapse stinking and soiled into our tents.

DAY TWO:

Reveille — Charlie's interminable "Cooee" shatters the 4.30am stillness. A wash, followed by breakfast of muesli, tinned fruit and coffee, energises. The Wonder Trekkers move out in right-left smartness.

The going is agony. Alien territory, tortuous, gut-wrenching. The cloying jungle seeps into you, radiating waves of body heat. You go on automatic pilot, using the one-two shuffle that will become a monotonous tread to the end.

Like the Diggers, you become attached to your lifesaver — the

hacked-from-the-jungle, body-length stick that propels you up and staves you down. Me and my blister protector — a gardening glove — become close on the ever-steepening ascent to Ioribaiwa Ridge. There is a false crest and another and another.

The jungle is still, the air fetid, the canopy enveloping.

The Japanese, their supply line depleted, had withdrawn, but there was little joy for the Diggers. Hopelessly overburdened under 30kg loads, they staggered in here, disoriented by the strange ebony darkness of the cocooning jungle, huddled in the chill nearly 1000m above sea level, scarcely warmed by the issue of half a blanket and meagre rations. Ahead was the prospect of clawing up and catapulting down mountains two or three times as high as Ioribaiwa.

We are again hours behind schedule. Ahead is the awesome Maguli Range, a mongrel of a mountain that will reduce the Naive Novices and even the sterner stuff to abject terror and exhaustion, with its 11 false crests and devastatingly steep descent.

You stop thinking in conventional distances. They mean nothing. Time becomes your measure. Our Fearless Leader becomes Half-hour Charlie. "How long, Charlie?" "Oh, half an hour." Millennia later, you arrive.

A few of us stagger over the final crest and reach Naoro village at sunset, the skies again sobbing. The bliss of hearing a barking dog soon turns to dejection at finding our bush camp site is still half an hour on — through a hellish descent of slick red clay.

There is little joy in camp. Most of the tents and food are behind us — in the packs of our angels, who are nursing the rest of the novices through their pitch-black torture. Like their Fuzzy Wuzzy forebears, they have stayed to tend the wounded.

Many a mother in Australia, When a day's work is done, Sends a prayer to the Almighty For the keeping of her son.

Asking that an angel guide him, And bring him safely back, Now it seems the prayers are answered, Up on the Kokoda Track.

Though they haven't any haloes, Only holes slashed in their ear, And their faces have tattoos, And there's scratch pins in their hair.

Bringing back the wounded, As steady as a nurse, Using leaves to keep the rain off, As gentle as a nurse.

Slow and steady in bad places, On that awful mountain track, The look upon their faces Makes you think that Christ is black.

At 9.30pm, the sodden mob straggles in. One collapses, sobbing hysterically. The human megaphone is spent after his call of the wild — Awwrgghh! — on the track, his shattered companions standing there like zombies. We will laugh about it all later, but for now the talk is dark.

DAY THREE:

The inevitable cooe. She Whose Foot Has Never Left Concrete looks for the first time at her surroundings. "Well, we're here. But where the — is here?"

A revision in plans: the Wonder Trekkers are to move ahead with their own angels, own tents and food and rendezvous with us at night camp. Charlie moves into motivation mode: "Give it the old G and D — grit and determination. You can do it."

Resolve toughens. Blisters are slathered in plaster. We move out along a swampy flat. It's muddy and murky, tree-root tripping but endurable.

Diggers slogged here in mud up to their knees. Les sombrely recalls, weighed down by inappropriate uniforms and weapons. "I'd see blokes crying in frustration and rage, trying to haul their legs out. Sprawled flat on their faces time and time again." Their feet were literally disintegrating — soles peeled away, ulcers rotting right through the flesh, leaving holes from top to bottom. They were further depleted by dysentery and a host of tropical diseases that ate their skins and stomachs.

The Track has no reason. It shoots up the highest ridges, plummets down the deepest ravines, crosses the longest spurs. In parts, it is but a foothold wide, flanked only by air and ferns. You teeter across, not daring to look down, or cling to tree roots in cliffs as the pathway vanishes.

We scramble over log river crossings, shuffle up the steep Menari Lookout and jag-trek down to the village, trudging in to the sound of women keening. This is a village wracked with grief. A two-year-old boy has just died of cerebral malaria. You pat your malaria tablets in thanks. The isolation of the place hits you. There is no telephone link across this godforsaken track, no radio. Help was too far away.

One of the Naive Novices can go no further. He is broken. We leave him here amid the eerie women's wail. Tomorrow he will fly out on a milk run. We are sad, but he feels he can give no more.

Charlie cuts the day short. We strike camp for the first time in daylight at the foot of Brigade Hill. Around the campfire, spirits and morale lift with laughter. If we got through the murder that was last night, we can get through anything. You try dinner for the first time. The baby mush of reconstituted beef and rice is heaven as you shovel it in.