

Swans conquer

Historic trek changes lives of

By CAMERON BELL

'I forgot to mention the poem Charlie read about the Digger spirit. It was inspiring and sent shivers up and down my spine. This war was all about endurance and the human spirit. It was being fought by mostly teenagers and they showed heroism beyond belief. My pop is the bravest person I have ever met.'

SYDNEY Swans rising star Brett Kirk was in a tent after a 14-hour day in which he had pushed his body to the limit, when he sat down to record the above entry in his diary.

The rain was tumbling down outside and his every muscle was stinging... and yet he had four days of physical and mental torture to endure. It was late last month and Kirk was one of six Swans players trekking 110km along the Kokoda Trail.

The Charlie mentioned in the diary is Charlie Lynn — a local politician who has taken countless groups to Kokoda in the past 10 years to raise awareness of one of our truly great war campaigns.

Late last year, Lynn was with Swans chief executive Kelvin Templeton at a function.

The two had previously spoken about sending a group of players to Kokoda under Lynn's guidance, and on this occasion Templeton thought the time was right.

"I hoped the experience would be a growth enriching one for the players' total life and bring home the

importance and understanding of what a fantastic opportunity they have," Templeton said.

"The exercise was not designed as a commando course training thing... the spiritual and historical aspects of Kokoda were integral components in the whole exercise."

The club chose six players, with Templeton wanting a mix of senior players and up-and-comers. Those chosen were last year's best and fairest Andrew Schauble, Kirk, Leo Barry, Rowan Warfe, Gerard Bennett and Ryan O'Keefe.

And the six days they spent trekking Kokoda — sometimes for 14 hours a day carrying 50kg backpacks — changed their life.

For Kirk, the trip held special significance, as his grandfather Wally Moran was a member of 39th Battalion — a group of 18-year-olds charged with keeping the Japanese at bay in 1942.

"During the trekking I was thinking about my grandfather and what he and the young soldiers must have been going through," Kirk said. "I really couldn't envision it."

"With the terrain and the weather it was one of the toughest things I've ever done... and we weren't even getting shot at."

my body is aching I am physically & mentally struffed. I keep referring in my mind to my pop & that spirit. The

Emotional journey: An excerpt from Brett Kirk's Kokoda diary

'Saturday, December 16. Charlie made a point today. We have been given the skill to play footy. Use that opportunity. Those men in the battlefields didn't have that opportunity. To be the best you must have an edge. You must do extra than the others.'

Another diary entry by Kirk — one that convinced Templeton the trip was a raging success.

"These players are young and healthy and playing sport as a living and have a greater opportunity than the average person in the street,"

Templeton said. "Compared to the men who fought at Kokoda, they have every advantage in the world. I thought, exposing that contrast would really bring that home."

And it did. Kirk couldn't stop thinking about his grandfather every step his took.

"I guess I have returned with a great appreciation of what my grandfather went through and the spirit of Kokoda," he said. "I know I talk on behalf of the others when I say we can use that spirit to help us in all parts of our life these days."

For Schauble, last year's best and



● Rough journey: Brett Kirk (top, right) and Rowan Warfe (above) trek on; the group with a fuzzy wuzzy angel (below right)

