

# Managers learn teamwork by reliving Kokoda battle

BY ANTHONY HUGHES

Stretching about 100 kilometres north from Port Moresby lies a strip of land richer than any Australian mining executive could imagine.

Papua New Guinea's Kokoda Track, where a truly legendary Australian World War II story unfolded, is a steamy mix of altitude, jungle, and seemingly unpassable rivers. From July to November 1942, 7,500 under-trained diggers battled the rugged landscape of the highlands and a Japanese army many times larger. The Australians inflicted heavy losses on the advancing Japanese, a campaign which historians claim was crucial to crushing Japan's ambitions to invade Australia.

More than 600 Australians perished before the successful recapture on November 2, 1942 of the village of Kokoda, which lies at the end of the track.

More than 50 years on, one Sydney-sider believes Papua New Guinea bears a significance to corporate Australia beyond the nation's keenly sought-after natural wealth.

To Charlie Lynn, adventurer, aspiring politician and organiser of the annual Sydney to Melbourne Westfield ultramarathon, the Australian soldiers' performance on the track holds valuable management lessons for corporations.

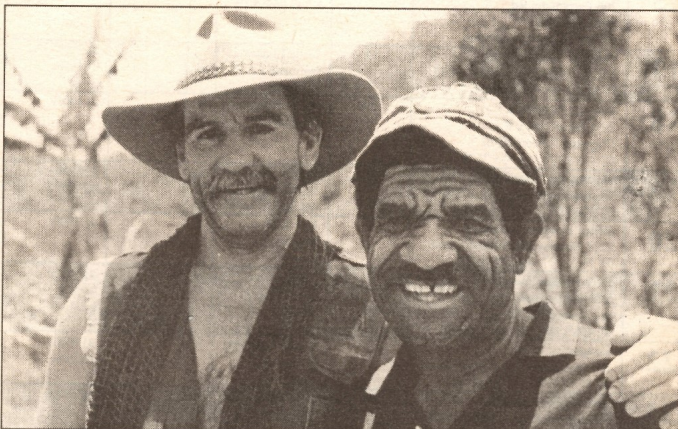
Lynn, with the help of several Papua New Guinea guides, organises and leads corporate treks along the trail, recreating the march to inspire a modern equivalent of the diggers' leadership and esprit de corps.

"People know nothing about Kokoda and do not care about Kokoda," Lynn said.

The former career army officer believes there is a gaping hole in Australian management, caused by an inability to take risks and a poor understanding of the power of teamwork.

Lynn cites a 1992 OECD report which rated Australia's first line managers as ineffectual and particularly weak in people-management, communication and strategic planning. The report ranked Australia 17 out of 22, falling behind countries such as Turkey, Spain and Italy.

So what's wrong with Australia's corporate leaders? Lynn said Australians today have had it



Corporate trek organiser Charlie Lynn, pictured with Omi, on Papua New Guinea's Kokoda Track.

too easy, having not lived through a World War which placed Australia under an immediate threat of invasion.

"Something in the last 50 years has gone horribly wrong," he said.

Lynn's corporate treks, which cost individuals about \$3,000 each, include presentations throughout the trek of significant battle sites.

The participants on the trek, which Lynn hopes to stage again in November, are divided into teams of six and allocated three guides from the Kiorari, the native group from which the original "Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels" were drawn.

The guides, who act as carriers and interpreters, have poor English skills, calling on the team to develop an effective communication system.

Kim Miller, a former lawyer and managing director of corporate gifts group Noveltees Pty Ltd, calls the trek a humbling experience.

"When your goal is just to get through to morning tea that tends to put a lot of other things we agonise about into a pretty insignificant perspective," Miller said.

"You are just in awe of the country-side. It's not a well-walked track."

Miller said the trek showed that leadership was a matter of leading by example.

"It does not take long before the conditions put people on the same footing. It's the ultimate example of walking to talk."

The team becomes responsible for its own management of the trek and is faced with a range of challenges along the way. Challenges include developing a plan for the transport of food and camping gear, the unexpected loss of the native guides, locating the wreck of a Japanese Zero plane and crossing of rivers. Many of the challenges involve negotiating with local villages.

Richard Willcock, a partner at Sydney lawyers Abbott Tout, said the trek underlined the need for teamwork for professionals.

"Large firms are quite hierarchical. I've attempted to apply some of the teamwork skills. (At the firm) we are all working towards the same goal. I've learnt by attempting to work cooperatively you can create a much higher level of satisfaction," Willcock said.