

The Kokoda kids

Torrential rain, mud slides and a 10-day trek – unorthodox methods for building self-esteem, but it worked for a group of troubled teenagers. **JUDY ADAMSON** reports.



Photograph by SAHLAN HAYES

Above: nine young Kokoda adventurers ... from left, Elizabeth Fraser, Heath Ducker, Christina MacDonald, April Rumble, Heath Livingstone, Michael Holt, Travis Ward, Anthony Humphries and Chris Berry. Right: trek leader Charlie Lynn.

THE rain is pouring onto the darkened jungle in heavy sheets. It's three hours into a 10-day walk on the Kokoda Track and already Elizabeth, one of the 10 disadvantaged teenagers involved, is exhausted and quietly weeping as she sits huddled in her rain jacket.

It seems like an experiment in torture, but to Vietnam veteran and Kokoda adventurer Charlie Lynn, it was the best motivational tool he could think of for the group.

Lynn, who is also a member of the NSW Upper House, regularly takes business executives on the track to build team thinking and individual self-esteem – both of which were sorely needed by the 15- to 18-year-olds, many of whom have come from broken homes, been sexually abused or have had to deal with the death of one or both parents.

Witness travelled with the group to Papua New Guinea in April, and the resultant dramas and revelations in the lives of the young people appear on our screens later this week.

Watching their struggles in the unrelenting terrain of PNG, you wonder how anybody could finish such a journey, let alone teenagers who have difficulty believing in themselves.

A 10-day walk is hard enough, but when you add to it frequent torrential rain, steep and slippery inclines, mosquitoes, stumbling through mud, wading through chest-high water and often sleeping wet and cold, you begin to respect what this group achieved – and what Australian soldiers not much older than them achieved some 56 years ago.

The teenagers belong to an organisation called Youth Insearch where they work through their problems and receive, and give, support. All volunteered to go to PNG as part of a leadership development program, but many had no clear idea what they were in for.

"I didn't know it was going to be so hard," says Heath Livingstone. "I had absolutely no idea how it was going to be ... but it's wonderful to be able to say I've walked Kokoda."

Christina McDonald says she had an inkling of what lay ahead, and admits to being "violently ill because I was so scared about it, and the physical strain it would put on my body".

Nine of the 10 who took part met last week to watch the program and relive their experiences. Constant banter flew to and fro as they watched the antics of Travis the joke-cracking motivator, April the "bossy bitch", and Heath "cardiac" Ducker, who

had to pull out of the walk because of a torn chest muscle.

They were silent for some of the more serious fights and poignant moments, but often roared with laughter at the hardships, well behind them now and so seemingly small. A loud cheer also arose when the packets of instant mashed potato appeared on the screen.

Not all of them made it to the end of the trek – half of the 10 pulled out through injury, exhaustion or lack of will – but all were keen to either tackle the trip again, or go back and finish what they had begun.

Michael Holt, who knew by the second night of the walk that he wasn't going to make it, has determined to get some proper training and return. Chris Berry finished the trip and wants to go back because it was "good fun" – despite having to walk at night in the pouring rain.

Even Elizabeth, who shed desperate tears of frustration at the harshness of the experience and the apparent heartlessness of Charlie (something with which many could sympathise), plans to go back.

"I would never have applied to do it if I hadn't really wanted to do it," she says. "I want to prove to myself that I can actually finish."

The 90-kilometre walk was stretched to 120 kilometres by Lynn, who took the teenagers on a number of side trips to test their mettle further and pull them together as a group.

Unrelenting on those he considered as quitters, and loathed at times by several of the less gung-ho kids on the journey, Lynn was also extremely harsh on the more enthusiastic of them who sought at times to do things their own way, without considering the others.

"Do you know the difference between adventure and stupidity?" he roars at one stage, shaking Travis Ward, who has walked carelessly on ahead of the others.

Having done the walk more than 20 times, Lynn was well aware of the physical extremities and confusion the kids were experiencing. He had also heard their life stories and felt great compassion, but during the program explained that he could not give the teenagers an easy run on the track or they would gain nothing.

"Any assistance I offer them in the short-term will be to their long-term detriment," he says. "They have to figure it out for themselves."

Yet while constantly berating the



teenagers about running behind schedule, and adding to their workload by making them build stretchers and carry a "wounded" member of the party, Lynn also provided them with singular experiences such as meeting a "fuzzy-wuzzy angel".

It is touching to watch a couple of the boys weeping with gratitude, careless of the conventional toughness that might have prevented them from showing their true feelings at home, as they thank this dignified old man for the help he and his comrades gave to their grandfathers.

Despite getting a dressing down from Lynn during the trek, Travis – whose goal on the trip was to learn to control his temper – understood perfectly well where Lynn was coming from.

"Some people have got a soft spot for youth, and he has got that soft spot, but he sets us on the right track mentally," he explains. "He just says, 'Get up off your arse and make the decision!'"

However unorthodox Lynn's methods might be, they do seem to have worked for this group. They might be young and lacking in leadership experience, but on the trek you can see that they gradually take charge in difficult emotional or physical situations.

They might yell and argue, and they certainly get fed up with each other, but they also get the job done – and try to ensure that everyone is on board when it's over.

Some know what they want for the future. Others are still deciding. All know they will have to fight to be a success in whatever they choose. But they agree that after braving "the track", even for a few days, they are ready for anything.

"Before I did this, I didn't have much self-esteem," says Chris. "I didn't have any belief in my ability. But now, you know you can do things – you know that if you put in the effort, you can achieve a goal."

WATCHING BRIEF

SHOW: *Witness: Kokoda – Mud, Sweat and Tears*
DAY: Thursday
TIME: 9.30pm
DURATION: One hour

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Hi-Fi Headlines

The latest 'budget' offering from Krell has arrived. The KAV-250cd CD player is the least expensive CD player that Krell have ever released, even though at \$4,990, many people would probably debate the term 'budget'. At the same time, there can be no doubting that this unit offers real value for money. Like the similarly priced Meridians, it is a player that aspires to true audiophile status, without the associated cost (if you think that \$5,000 is a lot for a CD player, consider their other new release, not available in Australia, as yet at least, which would sell for \$45,000.)

The other C.D. player that is doing remarkable business, without any promotion or fanfare is the A2CD Musical Fidelity CD player. Time and time again we compare this unit to some very highly fancied, more expensive units only to have the Musical Fidelity come out as favourite. It sells for \$1,399, and if you are looking for a player that is a little above the average, this really should be on your short list.

Still on the subject of CD – sort of – we have just received the first DVD 96kHz/24 bit music only disc. At this stage there has been no standard announced for DVD music only discs, but this at least gives you an idea of what is possible, and certainly an indication of what we should have (The age old battle of quantity - lots of music on a disc - over quality is, as usual, raising its ugly head). The disc has been released by Chesky Records, and consists of jazz tracks from some of their various artists, plus some test tones. The very popular Pioneer DV-505 DVD player will auto select the 96kHz signal, (not all players will, so check before you buy the disc.) This disc sells for \$59.00, and can be ordered by phone (although it will cost an additional \$5.00 for packaging and post).

In our last newsletter we announced that we had just received a new shipment of the DV-505 players, the bad news is that they have completely sold out again. The good news is that we will be receiving another, albeit smaller, shipment later this week. The bad news is, this is the last shipment for a month, and this delivery will not last anywhere near this long.

We have just received our winter newsletter. If you are not on our mailing list, and would like a copy, please give Sylvia a call and we will be pleased to forward it on to you.

Finally - one for the bargain hunter. We have a second hand Panasonic DVDA300 DVD player with built in AC-3 (Dolby Digital) processing for \$795, complete with remote and box.

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