

50 YEARS ON AUSTRALIA REMEMBERS

For Australian soldiers, walking the Kokoda Track was a nightmare prelude to the 1942 battles at Kokoda, a veteran told **MARC LLEWELLYN** who last week walked the track.

"Looking back, I can't help but think they were wonderful men. It's hard to believe that men could be so good. They were boys from out of the city and the bush. They were very proud and brave men. They did it because they had to do it. It wrings my heart. It makes you proud to be Australian and be associated with them."
John Sim, Signals Sergeant, 39th Militia Battalion.

I SURAVA. Colonel Ralph Honner. Blank looks. The diggers of the 39th militia. Brigade Hill. Never heard of them. So much for Australian education about its formative years.

The Kokoda Trail? Ah, now it's starting to mean something — except the name itself is an Americanism. The Kokoda Track, that "bloody track"; its moody, jungly depths and grotesque, putrid hills are as unforgiving as ever.

Unlike Mr John Sim of the now-disbanded 39th Militia Battalion, my preparation for

Fear and loathing on the punishing Kokoda Track

the 10-day trek involved step-up machines, stationary cycles and heart monitors. Sim and his mates ran in full kit, careered around obstacle courses and played cricket.

While they went to battle in the jungle with desert shirts and shorts (the lucky ones with half a blanket), I did the same with mozzie repellent and waterproof poncho.

Mr Sim, now 79, was a 25-year-old sergeant when he walked and fought the Track in 1942. The average age of the 480 raw militiamen (nicknamed the Chocolate Soldiers) of the 39th was 18½.

"We were naturally nervous, but not to the point of despair. We were still being filled up with stories of short, fragile Japs with thick glasses and buck teeth — cartoon characters. We had been taught they weren't very much of an enemy. But they were just the opposite, as we found out to our cost."

Highly trained Japanese veterans were not on our itinerary, but we still had the Track, which hour after hour, day after day would taunt us, spite us, twist us up and kick us when down.

At Ower's Corner, in the southern foothills of the Owen Stanley Range, the



Proud and brave . . . medals and mementoes of Sergeant Sim.

39th had their last good feed at a plantation before the long 100 kilometre march along the track to meet the

enemy at Kokoda. Here, the owner unnerved them by bringing out a grindstone to sharpen their bayonets.

At the same place we check gaiters, packs and muesli bars. Everyone is silent and already perspiring in the extreme humidity. The Track ahead is mud-brick red. Our leader is Australia's Indiana Jones; ex-major, professional motivator, aspiring politician and leader of Kokoda Treks, Mr Charlie Lynn.

"It's a relatively easy day," Lynn says. "But you rediscover the law of relativity."

We set off, 15 of us still tipsy after our Air Niugini flight, packs biting into our shoulders. Down we go and down, down, down we continue, our legs turning to jelly. Butterflies flutter tauntingly past our drenched and aching bodies. We ford the Goldie River, up to our thighs in running ice.

Then our first major obstacle, and it's the start of the Kokoda Shuffle: one foot in front of the other, up and up, knee to chest. I pull my dead weight up with a bamboo stick (my best friend, my rifle). I grapple and grasp for tree roots and clumps of spiky grass. My head pops up through the clouds, then down again for six more hours of grinding sheer hell to the top of Imita Ridge.

VP DAY

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Down once more through thick, sticky jungle as the light peels away. A final long-winded haul over slippery river-bed boulders and we make it in time for dried pasta and sweaty bed.

COOOO—EEEEEE! No, it cannot be true. Still dark, but I get up anyway, just to please Charlie.

The jungle is denser now, folding in on us. Tangling its merciless, tripping roots around our blistered, crinkly-wet feet. Every up-hill lurch rips and jolts my body. I jab my stick's bayonet-sharp point into the slippery mud, just as John Sim did more than 50 years ago with his rifle and bayonet, heave and gasp, and drag myself a step further up.

It is never ending. After one mountain there is a second, higher, steeper and more malevolent. We cross a land bridge, with sheer drops on either side, built by a malicious nature.

The near-vertical track for the next nine hours is washed out, leaving behind snaking roots of crawling trees, ridging and ditching, higgledy-piggledy. I gulp at my water bottle and pull away croaking and gasping for breath. The world is silent, foul, oppressive and tangling all over me.

I reach the top. It can't get worse. And then, in another cold-blooded test of my perseverance, it buckets with rain.

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