



KOKODA TRACK

On the trail of the fighting spirit of Australia

WALKING the infamous Kokoda Track is an extraordinary, humbling experience. One of the toughest treks in the world, the track has a profound effect on the adventurer.

Not only is there the seemingly impossible challenge of the excruciating mountain terrain, there is also the natural beauty of the pristine river rapids, the fireflies at night and the spectacular jungle-covered mountains and valleys.

There is the exposure to a completely different culture so near to home, and the wonderful hospitality of people who live close to nature.

There is the inspiration and camaraderie of fellow travellers. And there is the stepping back into a time almost too horrible to imagine when Australians and Papuans gave their lives for each other in defence of their countries.

The single-file track - stretching

Deep in the jungles of Papua New Guinea lies a track which has come to symbolise the indomitable spirit of Aussie Diggers, brave men who fought and died to save their country. On the 50th anniversary of the bloody battle, **STEPHEN SKINNER** set out for Kokoda.

from just north of Port Moresby for 100km through the Owen Stanley mountain range - has apparently changed little since the dark days 50 years ago when Australian soldiers, most of them teenagers, fought the Japanese in the jungle mud, with the crucial help of local carriers.

It winds past the scenes of terrible battles, the guns long since silent but the memories strong in the minds of those who were there.

Our trek party, made up of 18 Australians led by former army major **Charlie Lynn**, of Sydney-based Kokoda Epic, had some special links to the battles for Kokoda. One man's

father had fought on the track; another man's brother had died there; the fathers of several of our carriers had humped supplies in and wounded soldiers out - and one man had actually been there.

"This time the water is clean," said one of our carriers, **Isaac Matama**, whose father was one of the famous Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels during the war. "My father told me they drank water running with blood."

Isaac was one of 15 carriers whose company alone was worth the trek - more laughter, kindness and friendliness is hard to imagine.

Les Cook, a 70-year-old retiree

from Canberra, had seen these qualities before. "The people are the same now as they were then," he said. "You can see the compassion in their eyes."

Cook had been on the track 50 years ago as a young Digger who had joined up at 17 and spent the next six years at war.

For fear of big-noting himself in the eyes of his former comrades, Cook would not talk on the record about his PNG war service, except to say: "I don't see what I did then as being anything that any other Australian would not have done."

A real character who insisted on carrying his own pack, Cook once heard someone say there were no problems in life, only challenges.

"I don't know who it was that said that," he said, lying exhausted in the jungle between Menari and Efogi on the track, "but it sounds like someone who never had any problems!"

For us the Kokoda Track was a real challenge, especially the first and last two days of the nine-day adven-

ture. We were also the first and last "average" group **Charlie Lynn** will take along the track from the Port Moresby end.

That way is much tougher than from Kokoda, and Lynn - being a former NSW ultra-marathon champion and organiser of the Westfield Sydney-Melbourne runs - over-estimated the stamina of those carrying their own packs.

On the first day the stragglers eventually staggered into camp well after dark. People were exhausted.

The next day was more of the same for 14 hours. At one point after dark a long way from camp, our group of stragglers, minus camping gear, wondered if we might have to spend the night out in the rain.

It was moments like those that provided the tiniest glimpse of what it must have been like for the Diggers, outlined in such books as *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes*, by Peter Brune.

VILLAGE PEOPLE

ENTERING Naduri must be like walking into heaven. We climbed up to the village for what is surely one of the world's most magnificent mist-shrouded mountain valley views.

The carriers had been getting excited for a couple of hours, realising they were nearly home. For most of the trek they had kept to our pace, but on the track to Naduri they gently prodded us along.

Our welcome was worth the entire journey - greater hospitality is hard to imagine.

Many of the 150 villagers turned out to greet us with handshakes, flowers and an array of local fruit and vegetables.

During the feast former Digger **Les Cook** chatted - through an interpreter - with five village elders who had been carriers during the war, all of them proud old men.

One was the father of our team leader, **Alex Rama**.

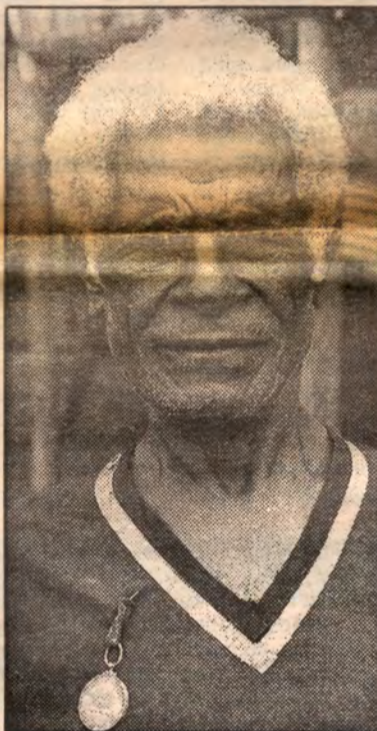
"The carriers liked the Australians because they were saving their country," he said. "We want more tourists to come because they buy food and fruit and other things they need."

A rugby field formed the village square, with the boys who were playing touch football after school exhibiting the same exuberance as their national team, the Kumuls.

After an open-air shower under piped mountain water, we joined the rest of the touring party and some of the villagers around an open fire.

Later, bedded down in our tents, we listened to the laughter and muffled conversation drifting from the basic wooden stilt huts which make up home for the villagers.

The bell for the morning church service was our wake-up call and after more laughter and handshaking, we set off for the next village, **Myola**.



HEADMAN: Naduri Village.

AN ANCIENT LAND

PAPUA New Guinea, just to the north of Australia, is the last of a string of islands spilling down from South-East Asia.

Dividing the mainland north of Port Moresby is the rugged Owen Stanley Range, which the 100km Kokoda Track slices through.

PNG and Australia were linked until 6,000 years ago - before the end of the last Ice Age - but their geographies are very different.

Steep, jagged slopes, rapidly flowing rivers, broad swamps and thick forests are the lie of the land in PNG, and the segment of the earth's crust on which most of the country sits is highly mobile.

In his book *Papua New Guinea*, ABC correspondent **Sean Dorney** says: "The friction caused by its constant movement has created the folded and faulted mountain ranges which continue to shake and occasionally explode to this day." Weather patterns vary signif-

icantly. According to **Dorney**: "For eight months of the year Port Moresby is brown, hot, extremely dry and dusty, whereas **Lae** and **Rabaul** are green, hot, humid and wet all year round."

The diversity of the people and cultures is the nation's most distinctive trait. The people speak more than 700 different languages and the difference in physical appearance is quite marked.

The highlanders of PNG were among the earliest people to grow food intensively. Sugarcane originated there and was being planted around 8,000BC.

Today, most people in PNG still live off the land. Prime Minister **Paias Wingti** said: "Unemployment in New York means no home, no food, no land."

"In PNG, everyone has a home to return to and food is plentiful, if only you can dirty your hands to plant."

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