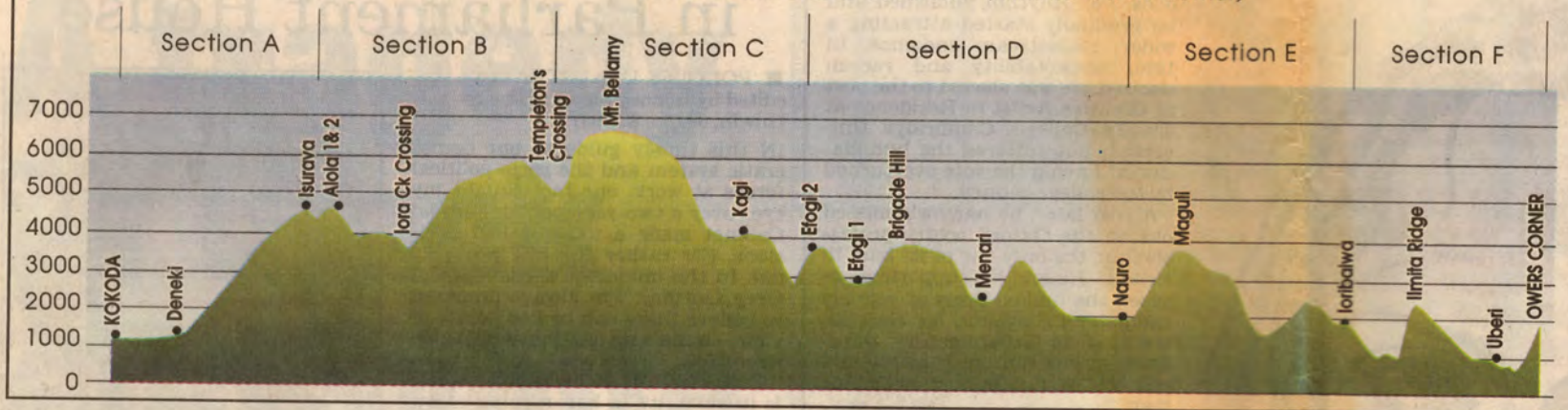


## The Kokoda Track (Kokoda-Owers Corner)



# On the trail of glory

By Katherine Tulich

**I**T'S curious what some people consider a holiday these days. Lazing on a tropical beach or skiing the Alpine slopes may be more typical images. But trekking for nine arduous days through a jungle that traverses nearly 100km of mountain range with scarcely a hint of home comforts? Fools rush in...

Each year, however, a curious blend of people is drawn to trek Papua New Guinea's infamous Kokoda Track, one of the most physically demanding mountain tracks in the world and well deserving of its wartime tag of "the Devil's Design".

For some it represents an emotional bond with a long-dead father whose wartime stories still haunt family memories; for a burgeoning breed of "supertrekkers" it's just another mountain to cross; for the unseasoned it represents not only a physical but a mental test of will.

Fifty years have passed since a handful of diggers, hastily trained and untried in combat, clambered along the track to meet the seemingly invincible onslaught of the Imperial Japanese Army. Vastly outnumbered and outgunned in a terrain that offered no respite, the young diggers bravely fought back to inflict a devastating defeat on the Japanese.

Former army major and Vietnam veteran Charlie Lynn hopes to keep the Kokoda spirit alive by leading a series of commemorative treks. His rich knowledge of the campaign becomes apparent at each landmark but it's his indefatigable attitude that provides the motivation to keep going, when aching bodies and shredded spirits sap the strength of even the hardest trekker.

While Lynn insists a healthy mind is the main requirement, it is wise to be physically fit. While I was a novice to trekking, my muscles were eternally grateful for my endless hours of step aerobics. But no matter how fit you are, the track is hard, very hard, and all of us would collapse at the end of each day wondering how we could possibly go on.

We began our trek, relief maps in hand, at Ower's Corner, a rough truck ride from

Port Moresby. It is here that we met our guides and porters, recruited from local villages, and watched in amazement as they swung our heavy packs on their backs as though they were filled with air. As we fiddled with our checklist of de rigueur equipment - water bottles, mosquito repellent, gaiters, malaria tablets, blister packs - we had little clue as to the task ahead.

In the next nine days we would walk 94km, gaining and losing 6000m in altitude. But distance gives no real impression of the track, for it's a winding path with no rhyme or reason - it climbs the highest ridges and plunges into the deepest ravines and ascends the longest spurs. While it is well-defined, it is only single-file wide and most of the time your eyes are planted firmly on your feet for fear of tumbling down the side.

The track itself, which links the north and south coast of PNG via the formidable Owen Stanley Ranges, is estimated to be centuries old. While it may not be considered the most interesting track in PNG, it is undoubtedly the most famous. It was first used by Europeans in the 1890s when miners travelled north to reach the Yodda Kokoda gold fields, but it was World War II that would give the track its legendary status. My first initial shock was the 4.30am wake-up call, a piercing "cooe" from Lynn. And here I was, one of your all-time confirmed night owls, scaling mountains at an hour when I would scarcely have raised an eyelid back in my bed in Sydney.

The first two days are undoubtedly the toughest. Within minutes our fresh clothes were dripping in sweat, our trekking boots scuffed and dirty. In the tropical humidity our bodies were ill-prepared for 12 hours of gruelling trekking, and we fell way behind schedule, making camp well after dark.

What was an intricate maze by day became a terrifying obstacle course by thin torchlight at night. By the second night nerves were frayed and exhaustion had



Hard slog: Charlie Lynn leads trekkers along the track

There are numerous rivers and creeks traversed by makeshift log bridges which require the skill of a trapeze artist to cross

set in. For one of our gallant troop it was too much, he could go on no longer and decided to opt out by bush plane at the next village.

It was an option we all considered, but a newfound mental attitude begins to sweep through you. I think we all instinctively felt that to take the easy way would equate with failure and would be a burden we would carry forever.

**I**T wasn't easy to continue, we were doing the track the toughest way. Most Kokoda trekkers travel from south to north, since the inclines are a little easier at the start. But we were retracing history, walking the same way as the diggers did, and if we had little appreciation of their efforts before, our blistered

feet and aching muscles gave us new respect for their hardships.

Their memory was with us every step of the way. Scaling the daunting Imbita Ridge, we stumbled over the remains of the Golden Staircase, the first excruciating ascent faced by the soldiers where several thousand logs of wood were pushed in, held in place by wooden pegs. Little of the steps remains, so we clawed our way up, grabbing vines or branches to haul our bodies onward.

The ascents tested our stamina but the descents were far worse, slippery and treacherous, knees and thighs jarring with pain as we fought for balance. And in between there are numerous river and creeks traversed by makeshift log bridges which require the skill of a trapeze artist to cross.



Children of the angels:



A bridge too far:

The comforts of a tent were replaced by a faint memory of a night in a tent. Thoughts extended to a dry T-shirt and a pair of shorts. The usual 8pm bedtime was a two-minute noodle and powder. A ghastly looking mus-

**B**UT despite the hardships, the trek remained high on my list. The fire often sapped our usual 8pm bedtime and caring for the group was a way when needed. The greatest joy...

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