

# Tracks

Reporter **Neil Wilson** and photographer **Peter Ward** tackle the Kokoda Track — and find it causes much more than physical hardship

► Pictures **Peter Ward**

# of their tears



**Y**OU don't walk over the Kokoda Track without it working you over.

Trekking in the footsteps of our Diggers from 60 years ago — up, over and down some of the world's toughest terrain — is more than a physical ordeal.

Once the body starts to hurt, once the aches, strains, blistered feet, bad knees, wobbly ankles and bruised backs begin to bite relentlessly, it becomes a test of the mind.

Then you begin to understand . . . a little.

Empathy for the young men sent to fight in this beautiful, unforgiving wilderness grows from the discomfort of the bone-crunching, winding track across the 2000m Owen Stanley Ranges.

This is not just a bushwalk, it is a pilgrimage.

Two weeks ago photographer Peter Ward and I joined a group of nine, led by renowned Kokoda expert and New South Wales MP Charlie Lynn, in hiking to Isurava for the opening of a \$700,000 memorial by Prime Minister John Howard.

Some of the nine had fathers who served in New Guinea and they are on a journey of self-discovery.

Others, like me, have come to see with our own eyes where the Japanese push towards Australia was slowed, then turned: Brigade Hill, Templeton's Crossings, Eora Creek, Isurava.

Some things on the track probably



► **On the track:** the group with writer Neil Wilson on the right, filmmaker Yahoo Serious on the left and MP Charlie Lynn, second from right.

► **Jungle hints:** messages left on the Kokoda Track for other guides.

▼ **War grave:** walkers Jen Neilson and Gillian Marks at the trackside grave of a Digger.

never change — the oppressive heat, the next long, brutal climb just as you think you're at the ridge top, another fall as your foot slips in the mud again.

We soon discover that the hiking sticks the Papua New Guineans cut for us are not for show. On treacherous, slippery descents they are as essential to saving our necks as they were for the Diggers.

But we do it without also having to lug rifles and ammunition on top of our packs.

► **Pilgrims still travel the trail courtesy of the Diggers' toil, such as the stairs carved into the side of near-vertical hillsides in 1942**

We have camp fires, dehydrated food, tents to sleep in and a change out of sodden, sweat-soaked clothes.

The first Diggers froze at night and had nothing to eat but bully beef.

Our hike is little more than a mere taster, a four-day, 50km tramp beneath a jungle canopy. Barely half the track.

Yet the track tests each person in different ways.

For me, it's trying to work, write, dispatch and walk from dawn until nightfall. For MP Bronwyn Bishop it's just completing the trek each night.

Some tempers and frustrations flare,

the group splits and a few of the slower are left behind, but we all part as friends.

When you start to walk, the physical conditions are a jolt. The altitude, weight of your pack and tropical humidity slap you in the face. Your shirt turns dark with sweat within minutes.

Our journey begins when we fly into Efogi, at 1220m, where a tiny grass hut contains old bayonets, rusted Bren guns and 1930s pennies and halfpennies from the pockets of men long gone.



up 1500m ridges and steep descents into valleys affect us in unexpected ways. Some of the fittest battle light-headedness and severe nausea within hours of setting out, yet have no option other than to keep climbing long into the night.

**W**E HAVE no other way out, but unlike lost Diggers, we can use torches. No enemy is hiding in the blackness waiting to kill us.

We grope our way down into Main Creek valley, then have a long, exhausting climb back up a mountain to reach Naduri at 10pm.

It's way past the bedtime of local children who had waited to sing, but a few

