

CHAPTER 24: Adventure Kokoda Response to the Draft Minutes of the KTA Forum of 28 November 2018

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Background to the Issue of Welfare for PNG Guides and Carriers

The welfare of PNG guides and carriers was first addressed at a KTA Forum in Sydney during the period 17-18 March 2015. The following resolution was passed:

'The meeting agreed with the provision of a trek uniform unique to each trek operator however the compulsory provision of a sleeping bag and mat was resisted due to the cost and the difficulty in maintaining control of issued stock.

'Mr Martin Pusinelli, a consultant with the TPA advised that he had spoken with many trek operators and some had advised of their negative observations regarding the welfare of PNG guides and carriers. This could lead to a negative image for the trekking industry.'

The 'resistance' came from Australian trek operators who later established the Kokoda Tour Operators Association (KTOA) to protect their financial interests.

A copy of the resolutions from the 2013 forum is attached. It is instructive because no action was taken on any resolution passed at the forum and nothing has happened since as a result.

The welfare issue was raised again four (4) years later at the KTA Tour Operators Forum held in Port Moresby on 8 November 2017. The meeting was attended by 63 delegates representing Provincial and Local Level Government, landowners and trek operators. The following motion was passed unanimously:

1. Pack weights be reduced to 18 kg;
2. Porters to be provided with proper sleeping bag and ground sheet;
3. Take home travel allowance of K250 upon completion of the trek; and
4. Increase minimum wage from K60 to K70 per day.

KTA officials were then required to table the motion for discussion at the Australian Tour Operators Forum scheduled for the following week in Cairns on 14 November 2017.

For reasons known only to KTA officials the motions were not tabled nor discussed. The representative of the proposed Porters and Guides Association who accompanied the KTA CEO and Operations Officer to Cairns did not attend the meeting and the Minutes of the forum have never been produced.

This begs the following questions:

1. **Why were the Minutes not tabled or discussed at the Cairns Forum?**
2. **Why did the representative of the Porters and Guides Association absent himself from the meeting?**
3. **Was the motion discussed ‘out of session’ between KTA officials and the Kokoda Tour Operators Association KTOA); and**
4. **Why have the Minutes of the Cairns Forum never been released?**

Whatever the reason the KTOA was able to successfully delay investing in the welfare for guides and carriers they engage for another 12 months – a good result for their shareholders but not so good for the subsistence villagers they employ.

Kokoda Tour Operators Association (KTOA)

The KTOA website advises that *‘Members of the association collectively represent more than 75% of trekker number across Kokoda’*.

This is fake information. The KTOA membership represents just a third i.e. 29% of the 37 trek operators licensed by the PNG Kokoda Track Authority (KTA). Of the 11 KTOA members one is inactive and one is unlicensed.

According to KTA records a total of 3267 trekkers crossed the trail in 2017 – of these 2053 (62%) went with KTOA members.

Overloading of PNG Carriers

The most abhorrent practice the KTOA advocates is the overloading of carriers by its members and their use of fake research to justify it.

In September 2017 a PNG carrier engaged by a member of the KTOA died on the trail – according to the PNG Kokoda Track Authority (KTA) Ranger at Owers Corner the deceased carrier was overloaded with a 28 kg backpack. Rather than addressing the problem the KTOA accused the KTA Ranger of altering his records without providing any evidence to support their claim.

A preliminary investigation by the Sogeri Police Sergeant, Max Maso contradicts their claim:

‘It is evident that the group on this particular trip . . . engaged by . . . (KTOA tour operator) . . . were all overloaded in breach to Code of Conduct stipulated under this code’.

Rather than accepting that there is a problem with the overloading of carriers the KTOA went into damage control after Adventure Kokoda advised that the maximum weight allowed for the PNG wartime carriers in 1942 was 18 kg.

On 26 February 2018 the KTOA posted an irrational response to this fact on Facebook:

‘Any operatorⁱ continuing to use references to conditions and weights carried by carriers on the Kokoda Track in 1942 is still living in the dark colonial days long past. Clearly the welfare of the carriers of the Kokoda campaign was not of primary concern of their colonial masters.

‘Suggestions made recently that the carriers during the war were restricted to carrying 18kgs is a gross misrepresentation of the brutal conditions in which the carriers worked.’

The reference KTOA quoted to justify their exploitation of PNG carriers was an unofficial essay written by a junior summer vacation student at the Australian War Memorialⁱⁱ.

The facts are anything but a *‘gross misrepresentation of the brutal conditions in which the carriers worked’* as stated by the KTOA.

The most authentic research on the history of the Kokoda Trail was published by Stuart Hawthorne in 2003ⁱⁱⁱ. Hawthorne provides a detailed assessment of the reality of the conditions under which the wartime carriers worked and noted that:

‘One of Dr Vernon’s^{iv} first actions was to have the carriers’ maximum load officially reduced from 50 lbs (23 kg), transferred from pre-war days, to 40 lbs (18 kg)’.

The maximum weight of 18 kg for wartime carriers is also referred to in a book titled ‘The Third Force. ANGAU’s New Guinea War 1942-46’^v:

‘They and their native police recruited the carriers, organised loads of 40 lbs (18 kg) per man and sent them on their way’.

The KTOA was not deterred by these facts and responded with more fake research on 10 March 2018:

‘In the Kokoda Museum we read that during the war Porters had to carry up to 27kg. So someone must be right (obviously the KTOA) and someone must be wrong (obviously Adventure Kokoda) about what porters carried.’

The information they relied upon for this quote was an unreferenced extract attributed to Major H.D. (‘Blue’) Steward, Regimental Medical Officer, 2/16 Australian Infantry Battalion which read:

‘The Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) recruited carriers for the Australian Army. Although better treated, these ‘Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels’, as they were affectionately known, worked long hours in tortuous conditions, often carrying loads of 60lb (27 kg).’

This is a fake reference – there is no record of this statement in Major Steward’s book ‘Recollections of a Regimental Medical Officer’. In his published recollections Major Steward wrote:

*‘Medical care for the people of Papua and New Guinea was usually not a direct responsibility of mine, close though I was to them in their gallant work of carrying out our wounded on the Kokoda Trail. In those days they were grossly overworked and overloaded, as well as being underfed and ill-clothed. It was largely through medical advice – including that of old Dr Vernon – that their lot improved. **The carriers had their burdens reduced to a maximum of 40 lbs (18 kg),** hours of work were reduced to something approaching reason, rest days were provided, and blankets and sweaters were issued to protect them in the cold mountains.’^{vi}*

Major Steward’s recollections are supported by Australia’s official war historian, Dudley McCarthy, who wrote:

*‘General Rowell soon afterwards told General Blamey that, at 29th August, the daily maintenance requirements of Maroubra Force was 15,000 pounds (and that of Kanga Force 5,000 pounds). **To meet the Maroubra Force requirements, with native carriers on the basis of a six- to eight-day carry of 40 pounds (18 kilograms)** a native, would necessitate the use of at least 3,000 carriers, without allowing for the portage of their own rations, wastage among them and other possibilities.’^{vii}*

These historical facts are a matter of record and any attempt by the KTOA to reinterpret them to justify their ongoing exploitation of PNG carriers on the Kokoda Trail is disgraceful.

Their defiance is evident in the following statement on their Facebook post of 10 March 2018:

‘One thing is for sure that the KTOA have all agreed to have a maximum total weight of 22.5 kg.’

Well of course they would. That means they do not have to employ as many carriers as they should and they get to keep more profit for themselves.

The KTOA should be informed by PNG authorities that ‘*blackbirding*’ – an abhorrent practice involving the recruitment of Melanesian islanders to work as slave labour on Australian farms – was abolished at the turn of the last century. According to a book titled ‘The Blackbirders’ the recruiters were:

‘a tough band of international adventurers on the whole brutal, callous and completely unscrupulous in their methods of recruiting, concerned only with fulfilling a contract or supplying virtual slaves to whoever was prepared to buy them’.^{viii}

The KTOA use of selective comparisons with other countries to justify their exploitation of PNG carriers is akin to a modern form of blackbirding. According to a KTOA Facebook post of 10 March 2018:

‘This weight (22.5 kg) is often less but as a maximum this is a weight that is not just set by the KTA but also the International Porters Protection Group IPPG. On Kilimanjaro the limit is 20kg, in Peru it is 25kg and in Nepal it is 30kg.’

This is misleading. ‘Trekking Ethic No 5’ of the International Porters Protection Group puts the above reference into proper perspective:

*‘No porter should be asked to carry a load that is too heavy for their physical abilities (maximum: 20 kg on Kilimanjaro, 25 kg in Peru and Pakistan, 30 kg in Nepal). **Weight limits may need to be adjusted for altitude, trail and weather conditions; experience is needed to make this decision. Child porters should not be employed’.***^{ix}

The KTA is not a legitimate authority on this issue. The original maximum weight of 25 kg was established in 2009 by the Australian CEO of the KTA who had recently arrived in PNG and had never trekked Kokoda – he therefore knew nothing of the brutal conditions over the 138 km trail^x. The CEO accepted the advice of Australian tour operators who were aware of the commercial opportunities of leading treks across the trail and who obviously wanted to minimise their costs. The advice of experienced operators who had been leading treks across the trail for more than a decade prior to his arrival was ignored.

The maximum weight was later reduced to 22.5 kg after it was evident that the original 25 kg limit was just too heavy – as is 22.5 kg! It is interesting to note that none of the management staff who approved the decision would be capable of carrying a 22.5 kg backpack across the Kokoda Trail – and none of them has trekked across it in recent years!

Welfare of PNG Porters

KTOA members are not required to provide their PNG carriers with sleeping bags and mats. These items are essential for protection from the cold and wet conditions that prevail across the Owen Stanley Ranges. This contravenes Guideline 2 of the Trekking Ethics of the International Porters Association which states:

‘Above the tree line porters should have . . . a sleeping mat and a decent blanket or sleeping bag.’^{xi}

PNG carriers come from subsistence villages along the trail. Those lucky enough to get a job in Port Moresby are paid the basic rate of 60 cents an hour. This means they would have to work for seven (7) weeks to be able to afford a basic sleeping bag and mat of their own. This is an unrealistic expectation which means they often have to huddle together to endure wet ground and freezing

temperatures in the Mount Koiari area of the Owen Stanley Ranges while the Australian trekkers they are supporting enjoy the warmth of a sleeping bag in a sheltered area.

KTOA Submission to the 2018 KTA Review

In their submission to the KTA Review the KTOA wrote:

'Landowner / guesthouse owner expectations need to be managed. There is little to no understanding that unless there is a financially viable and sustainable trekking industry, the whole deck of cards falls down. Expectations of increases to porter payments, porter welfare, increase in revenue to guesthouse owners etc. do not reflect this reality.'

'This view is supported by the comments on page 2.1.2, bullet point 8:

'Many comments were received about the desire for better conditions for porters and guides including welfare, uniforms, sleeping gear, food, medical treatment (possible Medivac), pay, health insurance, training, pension, superannuation etc. KTA to be strict on porter requirements on the Kokoda Track and to ensure tour operators follow Code of Conduct.'

'Whilst the KTOA is also supportive of porter welfare, this reads very much of an entitlement mentality. Education is required:

- *Hard skills – i.e. customer expectation / health & safety etc.*
- *Thought process – that for successful commerce, all parties must bring something to the table – there cannot be a hand out mentality. Page 34 refers to the 'legitimate right of landowners to participate in and benefit from the Kokoda Track tourism experience'.*

'Again, this is correct, however this right needs to be translated to viable means by which this can happen; education and mentoring is needed to develop the skillsets required and the appreciation that self-sustainable change and development requires a contribution from oneself.'

This is a breathtaking statement that reflects both the ignorance and the arrogance of the KTOA.

So what is really required, according to the KTOA, is a combination of *'education – hard skills – and thought process'*.

They don't explain how they would 'educate' a subsistence villager to carry loads far heavier than the maximum allowed for their 'fuzzy-wuzzy angel' forebears in 1942 – or how they would 'educate' them to sleep on freezing, wet ground without a sleeping bag or mat in the upper reaches of the Owen Stanley Ranges – or how they would 'educate' their bodies to be physically sustained on packets of two-minute noodles.

The KTOA assertion that *'for successful commerce, all parties must bring something to the table – there cannot be a hand out mentality'* is reminiscent of a colonial blackbirder addressing a native work-party in the late 19th Century.

Whilst their submission acknowledges *'the legitimate right of landowners to participate in and benefit from the Kokoda Track tourism experience'* they maintain that *'this right needs to be translated to viable means by which this can happen; education and mentoring is needed to develop the skillsets required and the appreciation that self-sustainable change and development requires a contribution from oneself'*.

In reality, all a subsistence villager ‘can bring to the table’ is often a ragged t-shirt, an old pair of shorts, one or two thongs and a homemade bilum containing a thin blanket and a few local vegetables.

The KTOA submission doesn’t explain what sort of skill-set is required for them to carry an overweight backpack across the Kokoda Trail! They also don’t acknowledge that one of their own carriers died on the trail last year – according to the local KTA Ranger at Owers Corner he was seriously overloaded - in the eyes of the KTOA he obviously didn’t bring enough horsepower to the table!

The most recent defence against having to invest in the welfare of their guides and carriers is that they already have bookings for 2019 and their prices are fixed in advance. They neglect to explain that they have provision for such increases in costs in their Booking Conditions. For example,

1. Getaway Trekking:

‘Taxes, Charges and Currency Fluctuation

‘Government taxes, port charges and other charges imposed by Suppliers or third parties (including ticketing fees, airline and cruise line fuel surcharges) are subject to change. **If there are any increases in such taxes, charges or Supplier rates or any currency fluctuation which increase the price of your booking, we reserve the right to change the price you must pay by including the additional charges or amount (together with any applicable service fee and GST) at any time prior to and including the date of your departure, even if we have received full payment from you.**’

2. Kokoda Spirit

‘Price/Trek Variations

‘**Trek prices are subject to change at any time . . . trekkers are responsible for any price rises due to charter plane cost increases, accommodation, increase or costs in porters or other related costs until your trek and airline tickets are paid in full.**’

Is Welfare for Guides and Carriers Affordable?

The average price charged by [KTOA members](#) for a trek across the Kokoda Trail from Port Moresby is \$3795. The cost of a zippered sleeping bag and foam mat, purchased in quantity, is approximately \$70 which represents just 1.8% of the cost of a trek.

A small number of carriers would need to be engaged with the reduction in backpack weights to 18 kg. The additional cost of each carrier at \$29 per day would result in an additional charge of \$260 per carrier i.e. 7% of the cost of a trek.

Such small increases would be easily absorbed in within their current cost structure – however their Booking Conditions allow for all or part of the increase to be passed onto their trekkers if necessary.

This is a small cost to absorb in order to provide for the most basic comfort of the subsistence villagers they engage.

Conclusion

Sixty-three (63) PNG officials and trek operators voted for the basic provision of welfare for their guides and carriers.

The motion is opposed by a few Australian operators because they will have to either increase their prices or reduce their profit margins.

The KTOA has been successful in influencing/intimidating the KTA to avoid their responsibilities over the welfare issue for the past five (5) years by delaying debate on the issue.

Perhaps it's time now for the KTA to do a review of the KTOA which was established by a group of Australian trek operators to protect their own interests.

At first glance their website indicates that their corporate ideals are beyond reproach and their '*collective desire to see real, short and long term benefits to the Kokoda Track (sic) communities, landowners, Porters, Guides, Carriers and PNG stakeholders*' is laudable.

But in reality individual members of the KTOA have been honing their skills at dodging their responsibilities for years.

When the KTA was established an Australian operator successfully '*influenced*' the new organisation to introduce a 50 percent discount for students as these made up a large proportion of their clientele. PNG thus became the first and only country in the world to require subsistence villagers to subsidise wealthy Australian private school students.

Another member of the KTOA had previously been caught out trying to sneak 378 trekkers across the trail without trek permits which denied local villages their fair share of benefits from the trekking industry. So much for their '*collective desire to see real, short and long term benefits to the Kokoda Track (sic) communities!*'

The KTOA has been shameless in their ongoing attempts to use fake research to justify their exploitation of the local guides and carriers they engage.

KTOA members have provision in their trek Booking Conditions to increase the price of their treks in the event of a cost increase by a third party such as the KTA. The 2019 Kokoda trekking season does not start until April 2019 – this allows adequate time for their members to adjust their prices in order to provide for the basic welfare of their guides and carriers.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the KTA advise all trek operators that, with effect from 1 April 2019, trek operators will be required to provide the following for each guide and carrier they engage:

1. Maximum weight of 18 kg to be carried;
2. Provision of a zippered sleeping bag;
3. Provision of a foam sleeping mat;
4. Provision of a cap and shirt with the logo of the trekking company;
5. Minimum payment of K70 per day; and
6. Payment of a 'Walk-Home' allowance of K250.

Charlie Lynn
Adventure Kokoda
19 December 2018

ⁱ Obviously a reference to Adventure Kokoda who provided research to verify the claim that 18 kg was the maximum weight recommended by Dr Vernon in 1942.

ⁱⁱ The AWM is careful to include the following footnote to ensure their historical integrity is protected through their summer vacation scheme: 'the opinions expressed in the papers are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian War Memorial'.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Kokoda Trail – a History. Stuart Hawthorne. Central Queensland University Press. 2003. P 193.

^{iv} Dr Geoffrey Vernon was assigned to ensure the health and welfare of the wartime carriers on the Kokoda Trail was provided for to the best of their ability in the conditions at the time.

^v The Third Force – ANGAU's New Guinea War, 1942-46. Oxford Press 2003. P34

^{vi} Recollections of a Regimental Medical Officer. H.D. Steward. Melbourne University Press. 1983. P57.

^{vii} Australia in the War of 1939-45. Army. South-West Pacific Area. First Year: Kokoda to Wau. The Australian War Memorial, Canberra. Dudley McCarthy. P197

^{viii} The Blackbirders. Edward Wyberch Docker. Angus and Robertson, 1970.

^{ix} <http://www.ippg.net/trekking-ethics/>

^x The Kokoda Trail has a total climb of 6,860 meters. The total climb between the Mt Everest Base Camp and the summit is 3468 meters and the climb from the base to the summit of Mt Kilimanjaro is 4,900 meters. Trekking the 138 km Kokoda Trail is not as physiologically challenging as climbing Mt Everest or Mt Kilimanjaro but it is much more physically demanding.

^{xi} <http://www.ippg.net/trekking-ethics/>