

## Chapter 34: Kokoda: Conflict between management theory and reality in a Melanesian context

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## Introduction

A threat to mine part the southern section of the Kokoda Trail in 1996 led to an Australian funded Joint Agreement being established to protect the area by way of a World Heritage listing. The agreement was signed by the two responsible Environment Ministers in Madang in 2008.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) which is responsible for the protection and interpretation of our military heritage, was sidelined as a partner agency.

Since then, the Kokoda Trail has been managed as an environmental resource rather than as a pilgrimage tourism asset for the benefit of traditional landowner communities across the Trail.

The disbursement of aid projects across the Trail by the DFAT funded Kokoda Initiative since then seems to have been oriented by the need to garner influence within the Port Moresby bubble than with meeting the social and economic needs of subsistence village communities.

Australia's patronising use of aid-for-influence triggered former Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill, to threatened to 'boot out Australian officials' working for his government and 'turf out all foreign advisers by the year's end'<sup>1</sup>.

The aim of this paper is to provide some context between the theory of dealing with a subsistence culture in PNG and a snapshot of the reality we have experienced over the past 32 years.

## A Culturally Inappropriate Understanding

A paper published by Alistair Crooks titled '[A Culturally Inappropriate Understanding](#)' on 15 December 2020 is as applicable to Melanesian culture in PNG as it is to aboriginal culture in Central Australia. It is worth a careful read.

Two interesting statements in the paper are:

1. *'One never sees references to 'tribal obligations' in traditional culture. Incidentally, it is why 'Aboriginal communities' and 'Aboriginal' nations' are Eurocentric projections; and*
2. *'Such a 'Voice', as proposed in the eastern States, may well be appropriate for Europeanised Aborigines of the urban areas. But a 'Voice', as heard in remote areas, can be expected to be nothing less than a disaster.'*

These observations also apply to our Melanesian neighbours.

Provincial Government boundaries in PNG were drafted by colonial administrators prior to Independence. The current divide between Port Moresby and the rest of the country is indicative of the divide between '*Europeanised*' administrators in the Port Moresby National Capital District (NCD) and remote villagers.

The current [United Nations Human Development Report 2020](#) has PNG placed 155<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries in the international index of wellbeing behind Fiji (73<sup>rd</sup>), Tonga (104<sup>th</sup>), Samoa (111<sup>th</sup>), Marshall Islands (117<sup>th</sup>), FS Micronesia (136<sup>th</sup>), Vanuatu (140<sup>th</sup>), and Solomon Islands (151<sup>st</sup>) to be the worst in the Pacific. This indicates that the billions of dollars of aid funding dispensed by '*Europeanised*' administrators in Port Moresby has provided few benefits for those who reside beyond the borders of the NCD.

This is even though PNG has more people and a greater abundance of natural resources than the combined total of all other countries in their region, excluding West Papua.

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<sup>1</sup> 'PNG PM to Crackdown on Aid Middlemen', Courier- Mail, 3 August 2015

And so it is with the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative which has dispensed more than \$50 million in aid funding for the Kokoda Trail over the past decade but has not introduced a single income earning opportunity for villages. During this time 54,623 trekkers have been unable to spend all the money they bring for their treks because villagers have never been taught to provide goods and services that meet their needs.

A 2015 report by [Pacific Islands Projects](#) has revealed that just one percent of the \$50 million spent by the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative was allocated to training Traditional Resource Custodians across the Trail in ‘income generating projects’<sup>i</sup>.

## Kokoda Reality

The reality of the Kokoda trekking industry along the Trail is far removed from the Port Moresby based ‘*Europeanised*’ administrators who control the purse strings from their swivel chairs in the National Capital. None have ever trekked with a professional group to observe the interface between the paying customers (trekkers), their PNG support crews (guides and carriers), campsite owners, and villagers; the impact of onsite military historical presentations along the Trail; the outcomes of their failed programs initiated without any consultation with the key stakeholders<sup>ii</sup>; or any accountability for them.

A snapshot of our personal experiences over the years provide a feel for the reality of the Kokoda trekking industry which is far removed from the DFAT bubble in Port Moresby:

### 1. Efogi Labour Assistance

In 2010 I was conducting a mapping expedition to identify the wartime trail between Brigade Hill and the Kagi Gap. I assembled a team of six guides for the task but after some heavy going between wartime Efogi and wartime Kagi it was apparent that we needed more support. We returned to Efogi to engage a couple more carriers however I was told that the village had received instructions from Port Moresby that they were not to provide any support to me.

The leader of our team, Sullivan, told me to wait until he went over to his near-by village of Naduri to recruit some men from his own clan.

We had a couple of hours to fill while waiting and got into conversation with the Efogi villagers who I knew, and who were keen to talk. When I asked why they had been instructed not to help me they did not know the reason however it was clear the main perpetrator calling the shots was a KTA Board Member (who later embezzled some K250,000 from the KTA bank account with the assistance of his ‘*wan-toks*’ within the banking system).

The Australian CEO who assumed control of the KTA in 2009 was advised of the heist which had been well documented but chose to ignore it rather than create an ‘incident’.

I asked what would happen if they did support me. They advised that when they, and/or their families, went to stay in their ‘*wan tok*’ settlements on the outskirts of Port Moresby they would be bashed.

There are other examples of the influence of a Port Moresby ‘*mafia*’ along the Trail such as the vexatious land-claim over Lake Myola which destroyed the income earning potential of the traditional landowners at a cost of around PNGK1 million in lost income since it was initiated – it was eventually thrown out of court, but the damage has been done, the income earning potential has been lost, and nobody seems to give a damn.

We advised the Australian manager of the vexatious nature of the claim based on our dealings with the landowners over the previous decade, but he refused to get involved because the chief proponent of the claim was a member of his KTA Board. The campsite, one of the best

across the Trail at the time, is now derelict and the local community has lost a significant, sustainable source of income.

The Australian CEO never learned that appeasement is not respected in the Melanesian culture. He might have learned something if he had trekked across the Trail early in his tenure but this didn't happen as he busied himself with meetings, forums and workshops instead.

## 2. Menari Fish Farm

Our company, Adventure Kokoda, assisted Joe Matama, one of our PNG trek leaders, to establish a fish farm in Menari village. The project involved a lot of shovel work and finished up with a feeder pond, a breeding pond and a main fishpond. The fish, *supa tilopa*, grow relatively quickly and Joe and his family were soon selling them for up to PNGK30 each which provided a valuable source of income for his family. It also a valuable source of protein for the villagers who are vegetarian because of the dictates of their SDA Church.

Soon after some of the other clans poured battery acid into the pond and killed all the fish. Their reason was because the waterpipe running into the feeder pond was '*community water*' and not '*business water*'!

Joe made a couple of attempts to salvage the operation but with little success. It was closed a couple of years ago and the villagers have been denied a valuable source of protein – but they are satisfied because Joe Matama is not making any money from his enterprise (see 'money matters' below).

## 3. Medicine Vs Sorcery

In early 2004 our trek group was half-way between Alola and the Isurava Memorial when we came across a mud-wrestling match in the rain amongst our PNG guides and carriers. One of them had stripped down and was going berserk while the others tried to restrain him. During the commotion we tried to figure out the problem. One of our guides advised that he had malaria about three weeks before the trek which led us to believe that he might now have cerebral malaria.

Soon after, another trek group, Executive Excellence, arrived at the scene. There was a doctor in the group and after a discussion with him we agreed that he should be sedated so we could carry him back to the Memorial.

I had been told that the trek leader from Executive Excellence, Simon Small, was waiting back at Isurava village with a trekker who needed helicopter evacuation. I then trekked onto the village and asked if Simon could drop into the memorial to take our guide back to the hospital which he agreed to do.

I returned to the memorial late at night and joined our PNG guides around the fire as they were quite tense. They advised me that the spirits had decided to take our guide and that they were not wrestling with him – they were trying to stop the spirits taking him! They had later returned to the scene of the wrestle to sprinkle '*pourri-pourri*' around the area to keep the spirits away.

When we arrived back in Port Moresby a couple of days later, I visited our guide at the hospital (his parents had come down from the village and were sleeping under his bed). I had a talk with the nurses, and they told me he had been diagnosed with cerebral malaria.

Our PNG guides still believe it was the spirits who had come to take him away.

#### 4. Myaka Falls

Myaka Falls is a 30-minute diversion off the main track between Abuari and Alola. Some trekkers like to take a brief swim in the cold water at the bottom of the falls. On return to the track junction last year one of our male trekkers - strong, fit and vegan, became weak and drowsy. I suspected dehydration and decided to take a break to allow him to recover while he sipped on a rehydration drink.

I was unaware that a small group of our guides had returned to the pool where the group had a swim.

As the guides arrived back at the junction about an hour later the trekker had recovered to the extent, he could continue down to Eora Creek then up to Alola.

After the trekkers departed the guides explained to me that spirits reside in the rock-pool, and they were disturbed when the trekkers went into the water. They had returned to appease them.

They were obviously pleased that the spirits had been appeased which allowed the trekker to continue.

Whilst [sorcery](#) remains beyond the comprehension of the Western world it is one of the many grassroots realities we don't understand in PNG.

This blog post on the [Kokoda Trail Villager](#) was framed around a trek which included Prime Minister Scott Morrison in 2009. The Prime Minister's emotional reaction to his pilgrimage was recorded in his [speech to Parliament](#) on his return from PNG.

#### 5. Clan Vs Tribe

Inter-clan jealousies within villages are seemingly invisible but are rife and intense.

I recall a conversation with the headmaster of Sogeri National High School, an Indian national. He mentioned that one of the interesting characteristics of Papua New Guineans was the fact that they had little understanding of the value of a zero on the right-hand side of any number. I had not considered this before, but it suddenly made sense to me. Their numeracy is based on 'one-pela', 'two-pela', 'tree-pela' up to 'ten-pela' – then a hundred – but anything beyond this, a thousand, a million, a billion, etc are abstract concepts to them.

Any project designed to provide a group benefit along the Trail will always be greeted with enthusiasm, however within the mind of the tribe (all the clans), and within each clan, each one will be thinking '*how do I/we get that money/benefit for myself/ourselves?*'. When they realise this is not going to happen, they will subconsciously work towards sabotaging the project by ensuring that nobody else in the clan/group gets any benefit. They realise that half of nothing is nothing, but they seem happy for this to happen, provided the others get nothing!

This was played out in a meeting we facilitated between landowners at Owers Corner in the late 90s. They were all related and a couple worked for us as guides, but they could not agree on an initiative that would provide a significant group benefit and held out against it. It could have been solved but we did not have the time to devote to it and, as a result, 54,623 trekkers have passed by the site, and thousands more have visited it, without them receiving any benefits from the opportunities they presented.

We have also observed tribal differences in attitudes between the '*Koiari boys*' we engage from Central Province, and the '*Kokoda boys*' from Oro Province. They are both good – but differences in attitudes and jealousies become evident to those who deal with them over a period.

## 6. Money Matters

Most villagers along the Trail may well be illiterate in English, however they can count.

Campsite owners are generally disposed to provide the minimum facilities to collect their PNGK20 per night campsite fee. Unfortunately, they have no idea of the needs of trekkers regarding privacy screens and hygiene for toilets for example. We have discussed these requirements with campsite owners, via our guides, ad nauseum. They nod and agree as we measure out the site of the screens, etc. but nothing ever happens.

The only recourse we have is to count out the money they are owed each morning. We then count out PNGK100-K200 in front of them and put it back in our pocket. We then explain, via our PNG leadership group, that this is because they didn't do the work we had previously agreed upon. We have had some partial success in this regard – but it's clear that money is the only language they understand.

Along the Trail itself any work involving the maintenance of the trail, assistance with evacuations, etc. must be paid for. This is as it should be, particularly in a subsistence economy, but it is not always so because numerous trek groups do not meet their obligations in this regard. They promise the world at the time the emergency assistance is required but rarely follow through after they have left. This causes a residual resentment amongst those who are never recompensed.

Unfortunately, villagers have never been taught how to provide the facilities that meet the needs of trekkers regarding the maintenance of the Trail, or the services they would be prepared to pay extra for and thus provide them with opportunities to earn additional income.

We have also failed to assist them by engaging local academics to 'follow the money trail' to see how they spend the money they earn in the informal cash economy. If we did this, we would be in a better position to assist them with basic financial advice via some village-based training programs.

## 7. Engagement with Landowners

Landowner identification and regular engagement is a fundamental necessity for meaningful engagement with village communities in PNG.

We have noted that the Kokoda Initiative has failed to identify landowners across the Trail during their 12-year tenure in PNG, and they have failed to conduct a single village-based workshop.

The Pacific Islands Project report identified group workshops and meetings as essential tools for engagement *'during project planning activities (both strategic and operational) to ensure project partners and landowners are committed to the project and understand how it will be delivered. Site visits and discussions can be used to maintain dialogue and reduce costs during project planning processes. Group discussions and site visits are needed to ensure the project's annual work programmes are coordinated, implemented and monitored in a cost-effective manner.'*<sup>iii</sup>

The report also noted that these engagement tools come at a high cost in terms of time and money.

The report also identified around *'50% of landowner households across the Trail are residing*

*permanently in Port Moresby*’.

Our observations over the years indicate that the more educated and influential ‘landowners’ reside in Port Moresby and it is more likely these are the people the Kokoda Initiative has negotiated with to sign off on aid-funded projects. Such a strategy ensures their support for DFAT Kokoda ‘initiatives’ and their compliance in Port Moresby based forums. This could explain why an aid-funded primary school was built at Isurava with a capacity for 50 students. The school was opened by a DFAT delegation who chartered a helicopter to fly into the remote village for an ‘official opening’.

The population of Isurava village has been declining since the Isurava Memorial was opened in 2002 as many moved back to the battlesite which is where the original village was in 1942.

A later visit to the school revealed that the school has 16 elementary students aged between 3–6 years. It does not have a primary school teacher because there are no students!

The school was obviously not subjected to a cost-benefit analysis.

The failure of the Kokoda Initiative to identify landowners on the Trail (as opposed to Port Moresby) was evident in their construction of a much-needed cane bridge through the Nauru swamp area near the Brown River. As it transpired, the ‘landowners’ they engaged to do the work were not the owners of the land.

The owners of the land waited patiently until the project was completed – then came along and dismantled it!

The fact that the conduct of village-based group meetings and workshops is the most time-consuming and costly part of working with TRCs in their local environments it is no excuse for failing to do so.

## Governance

Governance is defined as: *‘The system by which entities are directed and controlled. It is concerned with structure and processes for decision making, accountability, control and behaviour at the top of an entity’.*

### Papua New Guinea Governance Facility (PGF)

‘The joint Aid Assessment commissioned in December 2013 by both the Governments of PNG and Australia dictates new directions for the Australian aid program that reflect the maturing economic and strategic partnership between Australia and PNG.

Key points for Australian governance aid included *‘expanding support for ‘good governance’ with greater emphasis on core functions of government, accountability and leadership through an expansion of the Strongim Gavman Program, better targeted anti-corruption and security efforts, professionalising the PNG public service, support for the Pacific Leadership & Governance Precinct and reframing Australian policing support’*; and *‘establishing clearer, more realistic performance benchmarks/targets to assess both Australian and PNG performance and to drive accountability and future agreed actions’.*

The operation of the KTA before and since this time under the auspices of the DFAT-Environment ‘Kokoda Initiative’ contradicts every word of this document.

The only conclusion one can draw from the fact that the KTA has never published a set of Board

Minutes or a financial report over the past decade is that corruption is rife within the organisation despite a multi-million-dollar investment in the DFAT-Environment 'Kokoda Initiative'.

### Interface with Melanesian Culture and Governance

A long serving Australian expatriate with more than 50 years' experience in PNG as a successful businessman, and five years' service as a Member of the PNG Parliament, observed that there is not a PNG businessman, bureaucrat or MP who can withstand the traditional obligations of their '*wan-tok*' culture. Another expatriate, married to a PNG citizen, advised that the word 'No' simply does not exist in Melanesian culture.

As a result, PNG officials may take actions which would otherwise be considered corrupt according to our Western understanding of the definition – but which are quite legitimate under their Melanesian interpretation.

It is therefore essential, according to the expatriate, for a qualified Australian official to be the final approving authority for the expenditure of Australian aid funds in accordance with our systems of governance.

### Comments re the DVA Military Heritage Action Plan (MHAP) for the Kokoda Trail

We are unsure of the status of the DVA Military Heritage Action Plan (MHAP) for the Kokoda Trail as no updates have been provided to the PNG representative on the Project Reference Group in recent months. This would indicate that no approvals have yet been sought from PNG National and Provincial Government authorities.

Our comments on the draft DVA MHAP plan are outlined below:

#### 1. Background and Indications from Research and Survey

The PNG Kokoda Track Authority (KTA) should be excluded from the MHAP list. There is not a single person in the KTA with any experience or qualifications in management, business, trekking, tourism or commemoration. The KTA has collected around \$5 million in trek fees over the past decade however nobody knows where the money has gone because they have never published a financial report. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most of the money circulates in Port Moresby. It now seems the KTA is reliant on funding from the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative and is therefore beholden to the DFAT officials now embedded in their office.

The KTA should be replaced by the PNG Flag Officers League which comprises former Chiefs of the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF), some of whom were trained in Australia or worked with Australian units. They have a much better understanding of commemoration than environmental officials in the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative and would be a valuable link for the future engagement of the PNGDF in the restoration of battlesites along the Trail and beyond.

#### 2. From Research and PRG Survey

##### a. Kokoda Initiative Partnership (KIP)

The 'Kokoda Initiative Partnership (KIP) Master Plan' was developed as an Australian socio-environmental document. The record shows It has not facilitated any support for the commercial development of the Kokoda trekking industry which is the primary generator of income for villagers along the Trail nor does it provide for the pillar of 'commemoration' which is the primary motivation for Australians to want to trek across it.



The Master Plan has focused on the delivery of aid projects that used to be delivered under the auspices of the former AusAID program. No funds have been allocated to honour our shared wartime heritage across the Trail since the Isurava Memorial was opened by Prime Ministers John Howard and Sir Michael Somare 20 years ago in 2002.

b. PNG National Museum and Art Gallery NMAG

Until recently the purpose of the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery (NMAG) was to record, maintain, interpret and showcase the 800 cultures of the 600 islands that comprise the modern nation of PNG.

NMAG was gifted by the Australian Government to the new nation of PNG at Independence in 1975. Since then, the institution suffered from what is regarded as ‘*build-decay-rebuild*’ cycle for aid projects in PNG. As a result, the Abbot Government invested a further \$25 million for its refurbishment in 2014.

NMAG has no record of any previous interest in the Kokoda Trail until the opportunity for a DFAT funded position (National Military Heritage Advisor) presented itself. The DFAT recruiting process, which could best be described as ‘*dodgy*’, resulted in the engagement of an American anthropologist who had no prior expertise in military heritage as Australia’s National Military Heritage Advisor on a lucrative 6-figure salary.

The NMAG initiative to construct ‘museums’ at Efogi, Alola and Buna was an expensive aid-funded ‘*thought bubble*’ initiated without any research or consultation with trek operators, trekkers, or any cost-benefit analysis to see if there was a demand for such facilities.

I led five treks across the Trail in 2019. Not a single trekker expressed any interest in looking at them – which was just as well because the museums were locked and the locals had not put out anything to sell. At Alola the locals continue to sit in the same area – about 50 metres from the ‘*museum*’ as they have for the past 30 years to sell their fruit and drinks.

According to the KTA Ranger at Efogi the ‘*museum*’ will eventually be reclaimed by the landowner for his own use.

Prior consultation with trek operators would have revealed that trekkers are interested in viewing objects ‘*in-situ*’ along the Trail during their treks – a simple reinforced glass enclosure with openings for photographs to be taken would have prevented the desecration of one of the most authentic mortar ammunition positions along the Trail – and the loss of PNGK40,000 a year in income for the landowners from Naduri village after it was desecrated by the Kokoda Initiative to make it ‘*safe*’!

Trekkers have little interest in viewing displayed similar items (rusted mortars, grenades, bayonets, rifles and small arms ammunition) in wire cages or huts. They quickly learn that once you have seen one – you’ve seen them all!

These types of displays of small-arms weapons and ordnance should be exhibited at Owers Corner and Kokoda where they could also be professionally displayed for viewing by trekkers and tourists to the area.

See 6. below for further comment re NMAG.

c. Kokoda Track Authority (KTA)

The KTA should be removed from the MHAP document due to the dysfunction of the office and the lack of expertise of any staff related to management, business, trekking, tourism or commemoration.

It should be replaced by the PNG Flag Officers Association to provide credible input regarding our shared military heritage.

d. Kokoda Tourism ‘Industry’

The essential stakeholders in pilgrimage tourism across the Trail are tour companies who invest in marketing, logistics, compliance; the paying customers i.e., trekkers who invest in the pilgrimage; and the traditional landowner communities who own the land they trek across.

Without ‘income generators’ the Kokoda Trail will be destined to be yet another aid-funded, welfare dependent operation in PNG.

In order to sustain Kokoda tourism the needs of the paying customers must be identified and met. This is normal commercial practice.

The record indicates that the commercial aspects of Kokoda Kokoda tourism, and the needs of key stakeholder groups have been ignored over the past decade.

3. MHAP Implementation

Issues adequately covered.

4. Enhanced Memory & Heritage – digital tools

a. Enhanced Digital Platform for Education Focused on children aged 7-10.

This sounds appealing in theory but the elementary/primary school system in PNG is not yet ready for the introduction of digital learning devices.

The most effective way of telling the stories of the war in PNG is via children’s books.

These should be written by PNG authors who understand the stories of their wartime carriers and their soldiers (known as ‘green shadows’) and who have trekked participated in a pilgrimage to get an emotional feel for the experience.

A more appropriate strategy in the short term would be the funding of books such as [Angels of Kokoda](#) by David Mulligan and [Roses at Eora Creek](#) by Rashmii Bell which tell the story of the campaign from a PNG perspective.

The availability of such books in PNG school libraries and the support of the PNG Education Department to have the PNG stories of the war included in the curriculum would encourage other PNG writers, poets and artists to tell their own stories.

The project could be developed in partnership with the Australian War Memorial, the PNG Department of Education and/or the Pacific Adventist University.

b. Enhanced Digital Platform for use on Trail via tablet/pad

No further thought should be given to this project without extensive market research to see if it meets the needs of trekkers and will be used by them.

Our experiences on the trail over many years indicates that most trekkers welcome their escape from digital devices!

The thought that trekkers might sit around a fire and use a digital tablet is good in theory but it does not reflect any form of reality on the Trail. By the time trekkers get into their campsite each day, organise their tent, their ablutions, wash their clothes and hang them over the fire, arrange to dry their boots, have their meal, have a yarn around the table, wash and clean their utensils, and get their briefing for the following morning's routine, they are ready for bed.

These activities become even more time critical for the few who will inevitably arrive later than the main group. Few ever sit around the fire for a yarn after dinner.

Professional trek leaders provide the authenticity of the experience via their battlesite presentations which include briefings, stories and poetry which allow for Q&A and discussion – these are more effective insitu than a digital tablet will ever be.

Our experience indicates that trekkers have varying levels of interest in military history. Many are happy with the presentations they receive as part of their experience. These include the issue of a 'Soldiers Guide to Kokoda and Trek Diary; a topographical map of the Kokoda Trail; a pre-trek briefing and a screening of the video 'Kokoda - The Bloody Track' on arrival; and detailed briefings at each significant site across the Trail.

Those who have a more considered interest in military history will either use the Q&A sessions at each briefing to inquire further or will discuss it with the trek leader as they trek, or during the breaks along the way. At the end of each trek, we provide them all with a list of recommended reading [on this link](#).

#### 5. Support NMAG for Heritage, Tourism & Educational Benefit

NMAG has a history of serial corruption and neglect as reported [on this link](#).

The organisation had no record of any previous interest in the Kokoda Trail until the opportunity for a DFAT funded position (National Military Heritage Advisor) presented itself along with the potential for an aid-funded income stream.

The only visitation figures available [on this link](#) advise that there are 1400 visitors a month to the museum. Anecdotal evidence suggests these figures are inflated however, even if they are true, this amounts to an average of just 45 visitors a day!

These visitation figures – even at their inflated rate – do not justify any investment in a 'Military Heritage Annex' at NMAG. Research would indicate that visitors to the site are motivated by the historical and cultural intrigue of the 'land of a thousand cultures'.

Of more concern is the fact that most of the 3000+ Australian trekkers who do have an interest in our wartime history will not visit the centre because their trek itineraries will not allow for it – our experience indicates they will be reluctant to commit to the cost of an additional two nights' accommodation in Port Moresby in order to visit the place.

Those who do squeeze a visit into their itineraries will spend the bulk of their restricted time in the existing cultural museum and art gallery which is now a first-class facility due to the recent \$25 million refurbishment funded by the former Abbott Government.

The most appropriate place to tell the story of the Kokoda Trail Carriers would be a 'Commemorative Centre' at Owers Corner – all the wounded requiring evacuation by stretchers were carried through, or to, this location *'to safety and the care of doctors at the bottom of the track'*.

#### 6. Protection, Maintenance and Management

Issues adequately covered

#### 7. Environmental Protection, Maintenance and Management

Issues adequately covered

#### 8. Health, Safety and Social Benefit

The MHAP for the Kokoda Trail provides an ideal opportunity for a joint ADF/PNGDF program to assist in restoring the integrity of significant military sites along the trail as part of their adventure training programs. This would include a study of each site, the restoration of weapon pits and discrete signage re the likely purpose of the pit, for example *'2 Section, 3 Platoon, A Company, 2/14<sup>th</sup> Battalion front line of main defensive area for the battle for Brigade Hill. Explain 'area of responsibility' for individual pits and their positioning to allow them to mutually support each other, the location of those 'in depth' to support the front-line pits etc'*.

In military parlance they would do a 'Military Appreciation' for each site based on historical records then recreate them for the benefit of trekkers.

#### 9. Water Course Crossings

These provide a unique opportunity to provide a safe, authentic adventure experience for trekkers as well as providing a constant source of income for TRCs.

According to official records, 54,623 trekkers have been able to safely negotiate water crossings over the past two decades due to the safety consciousness and the professional care of their skilled PNG support crews in all weather conditions.

During my trekking experiences over the past 30 years we have crossed all rivers and creeks in both 'wet' and 'dry' seasons, by day and by night, without incident. Our trekkers have marvelled at the traditional bush skills of our PNG support crews as they cobbled log bridges together from *'traditional bush-materials'* to get them safely across.

In recent years villagers have been engaged to build cane bridges which have become a feature of each crossing point. Many of the *'adventure'* photographs posted on social media feature these crossings.

These bridges obviously require ongoing maintenance and rebuilding at the start of each of each trekking season however they can provide a regular income and a great source of pride for subsistence villagers.

The DFAT-DVA proposal to install prefabricated 'permanent' bridges' will deny trekkers, the paying customers, of the authenticity of their experience and deny local villagers of a regular income and a great deal of pride.

They will also be many, many times more expensive.

Any argument that permanent bridges will provide a service to villagers reflects an appalling level of ignorance about the demographics of the Trail. There are no villages located in the Mountain Koiari area between Kagi and Naduri on the southern side and Alola on the northern side. Koiari people wishing to access Port Moresby either fly from their village airfield, or trek to Owers Corner before catching a bus to their settlement area on the outskirts of the city. Orokaiva people will either trek down to Kokoda and catch a flight to Port Moresby or a bus for the road trip to Popondetta.

Australian officials who support the installation of permanent bridges across the Trail should be required to trek across it with a professional trekking company to get a feel for the authenticity of the experience and conduct some qualitative research on the issue amongst trek operators, the paying customers, and TRCs across the Trail before they make their final decision.

### Summary of my learnings based on 101 treks over 32 years

- Melanesians are natural carers – if you need help, they will instinctively come to your aid and provide whatever care you need.
- They will never betray their own ‘wan-toks’ even if they agree that they are inefficient, incompetent or corrupt.
- They will never say ‘No’ to a request from their ‘wan-toks’ and if they have to adopt a ‘corrupt’ practice to satisfy the request they will do it.
- They like to please. This means they avoid confrontation (unless in a large group that has a grievance) and will agree to an outcome – even if it is contrary to a previous agreement that contradicts the latest agreement! This is why the DFAT-Environment Kokoda Initiative environmental ‘ranger system’ imposed on the KTA, based on the Australian National Parks model will never work.
- Intra-clan and inter-tribal jealousies are rife and intense. As a result, they will often prefer to sabotage a project if it means they must share any of the benefits from it.
- Decision-making is based on discussion and consensus – individually they might agree on a course of action that is practical and beneficial but will rarely make the necessary decision to take the necessary action step for it to happen. Therefore, regular workshops facilitated by a person familiar with local language and culture is such an important part of the process of having them buy into a process – as identified by the Pacific Islands Projects report but never enacted by the Kokoda Initiative.
- They are masters of their natural environment because of knowledge passed onto them from previous generations over thousands of years.
- They respect disciplined order which is consistent. For example, their adherence to strict SDA teachings provides order to their lives and provides hope for a better life in the hereafter. On the Trail we strictly enforce the wearing of uniforms; their daily duties; a ‘no betel nut-no alcohol’ policy and their responsibilities to trekkers. We now have guides and carriers working for us who were not born when we first started trekking – many of them now work with their fathers who are still with us. The feedback we receive via [TripAdvisor](#) and our own surveys indicate they have taken ownership of the standard we established. They also know that we pay them well, provide them with a ration scale similar to our trekkers, provide for their welfare and will meet their medical expenses in Port Moresby when required.
- Port Moresby based PNG officials and ‘landowners’ will agree to any initiative that has an Australian aid dollar attached to it. This allows Australian aid officials in the DFAT-Environment ‘Kokoda Initiative’ bubble to pursue their own ideological agenda and declare ‘*this is what PNG wants!*’.

## Conclusion

Prior to the arrival of environmental officials in 2009 the Australian High Commissioners (AHC) and staff were approachable and willing to engage with the pioneering trekking companies to obtain feedback on the issues concerning village communities and the environmental condition of the Trail.

This changed after the arrival of ‘experts’ from the Department of Environment in Canberra and the establishment of their ‘Kokoda Initiative’ which ran in parallel to the DFAT ‘Kokoda Development Program’ operated out of the AHC at the time. Both programs operated independently of each other in the early years which created a great deal of confusion.

The Kokoda Initiative assumed control of the PNG KTA which it converted to an aid-dependent surrogate run by aid-funded Australian ‘expert’ officials.

Soon everybody was a ‘stakeholder’, forums were conducted in capital cities in preference to villages; the Kokoda Trail was redefined as the ‘Kokoda Corridor’ with expanded boundaries to create a smorgasbord of aid-funded opportunities for environment officials, anthropologists, archaeologists, and consultants; and the management system reverted to *‘the law of the jungle’* across the Trail without a single management protocol in place.

The effectiveness of their management system imposed on the KTA is evident in their [‘KTA Strategic Plan: 2012-2015’](#) which was quietly shelved in 2016 when it was revealed that not one of their five Strategic Objectives or 33 objectives were achieved.

The plan has not been replaced. The KTA has never published a financial report and has not even produced a newsletter for the past seven years. Nobody knows where the money goes. Nobody knows what they do. They are now an unaccountable law unto themselves.

We held high hopes for a change in policy development which reflected a commitment to our shared wartime heritage on the Kokoda Trail and a management system based on a free-enterprise model with the election of the Coalition Government in 2013. Unfortunately, successive Ministers have continued with the same advisors appointed during the Labor era and have chosen to ignore their own long-term supporters.

CHARLIE LYNN OAM OL  
Major (Rtd)  
21 January 2022

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<sup>i</sup> Pacific Islands Projects [‘KTA Livelihoods Projects Scoping Study Final Report’](#) dated 26 May 2014 P.iv

<sup>ii</sup> The key stakeholders in the Kokoda trekking industry are those the entrepreneurs who generate the income and accept all the risks; the trekkers who pay for the pilgrimage; and the Traditional Resource Custodians who own the land across the Trail. All others are ‘interested parties’.

<sup>iii</sup> Pacific Islands Projects [‘KTA Livelihoods Projects Scoping Study Final Report’](#) dated 26 May 2014 P. 80