

CHAPTER 6: Proposal to carry The Olympic Torch across The Kokoda Trail enroute to The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games:

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The Spirit of Kokoda

The purpose of this proposal is to have the Olympic Torch carried across the Kokoda Track enroute to the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney.

The Olympic Torch Relay offers a unique opportunity for Australians to reflect on our history and to honour the sacrifices made for the peace and prosperity we enjoy today.

Australian history has not been accorded proper priority in the fields of education, media or the arts. Our lack of vision in this area has resulted in a paucity of Australian films, documentaries and novels and the neglect of the teaching of Australian history in our education systems.

It is a sad indictment that Australians know more about the Alamo than they do about Isurava. And more about Colonel Travis, Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone and Jim Bowie than they do about Colonel Honner, Bruce Kingsbury, Claude Nye or Charlie McCallum.

We have much to be proud about in our short history (*pioneering, aboriginal, military*) and we would achieve a greater sense of nationhood if we were to focus on the achievements of our forebears in these areas.

The 2000 Olympic Games offers a unique opportunity of honouring these pioneering achievements and sacrifices by routing the Olympic Torch Relay through the towns, cities and outback areas that form the fabric our great country.

The Kokoda Track is a symbol of the spirit of ANZAC - a spirit which manifests itself in the qualities of courage, mateship, selfless sacrifice, strength-in-adversity, stamina and endurance. It's a spirit reflected by the wartime journalist, Osmer White, who was moved to write of the men of Kokoda:

'I was convinced for all time of the dignity and nobility of common men. I was convinced for all time that common men have a pure and shining courage when they fight for what they believe to be a just cause.'

The spirit of ANZAC is the spirit of Australia. It's a spirit which will be honoured by the carriage of the Olympic Torch across the Kokoda Track en route to Australia for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney.

Thermopylae – Sparta – Marathon – Athens - Kokoda

The legend of the 300 Spartans who held the pass at Thermopylae against thousands of Persians has lived on for nearly 2,500 years.

In 490 BC the Athenian army, outnumbered six-to-one, defeated a vastly superior force of invading Persians on the plains of Marathon. A messenger, Pheidippides, was dispatched to Athens to carry word of the great victory. He ran into the ruling chamber and shouted, '*Rejoice! We Conquer*' - then dropped dead.

In 1896, the father of the modern Olympics, Baron Pierre de Coubertain, supported a proposal by his colleague, Michel Breal, to include the marathon in the first Olympic Games of the modern era. Greek officials eagerly accepted such a race and, according to the official program of the first modern Olympiad, the marathon was '*evidence of the Greek dedication to freedom as a nation and the sacrifice of the individual to maintain that freedom*'.

Almost 60 years later a small rag-tag bunch of young Australian diggers were called upon to reflect that same sacrifice when, in numbers reminiscent of those Spartan warriors almost 3,000 years earlier, they were called upon to overcome great odds in order to defend the freedom of their nation.

It would be a fitting tribute to those gallant young Australian diggers, and an appropriate commemoration of both the original marathon and its more contemporary revival, for the Olympic Torch to be carried across the Kokoda Track on its way to Sydney for the 2000 Olympic Games.

The Modern Olympics

According to legend one summer's day in 490 BC, the Athenian army, outnumbered six-to-one, killed 6,400 Persians and sent the rest of the invaders fleeing to their ships. The messenger Pheidippides ran off in another direction, speeding word of the victory across 24 hilly miles to the concerned residents of Athens. He burst into the ruling chamber and shouted, '*Rejoice! We conquer!*' He then dropped dead.

Apart from the depressing ending, there is one problem with the story - it almost certainly never happened. Herodotus, alive and writing at the time, fails to mention the heroic run in his account of the battle - not the sort of news item, if true, a scribe would keep to himself.

Herodotus does tell of one Pheidippides, a professional courier employed by the Athenians, who was chosen to dash an SOS to Sparta when the Persian fleet landed. Pheidippides managed the 150-mile assignment in 48 hours, delivered the request for military support, and returned home with a disheartening reply: the Spartans were busy celebrating the fete of Carneia, and suggested that the Athenians delay their battle until a more convenient time.

A half-century later, Plutarch was the first to write of a messenger who ran to Athens and expired after announcing victory. Plutarch called the hero Eucles, further confusing history. Time, however, cures all that is illogical.

Greek legend was in vogue in 19th century Europe. By then Herodotus' real-life messenger and Plutarch's scene-shifting device had become entwined. French schoolchildren learned of Pheidippides and his doomed run from Marathon. One who remembered the lesson was Michael Breal, who grew up to become a philologist at the Sorbonne and a colleague of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who shared his interest in ancient ideas.

When de Coubertin decided to revive the Olympic Games, Real went along to Athens in 1894 to help with the arrangements. He also contributed a suggestion. It would be a nice idea, Real said, if the Games of 1896 were to include a race commemorating the Pheidippides legend - a 24-mile run from Marathon to Athens. The thought was pretty outlandish, Real knew.

The Greeks had never been inclined to spend their leisure time running long. The ultimate distance event of the original Games (776 BC to 394 AD) was the 'doliches' - 24 laps around the stadium, about three miles. How would the marathon have been viewed? 'The Greeks would have regarded it as a monstrosity', wrote historian H.D.F. Kitto. The Emperor Theodosios felt the same way about the quadrennial competitions in Olympia, which had long degenerated into professional circuses and carnivals by the time the fourth century neared a close. When Theodosios banned the Games, competitive running disappeared for ages.

Real expected some difficulty convincing Greek Olympic officials to go along with his idea of an epic rerun. The cross-country running craze that had started in England and hopped the Atlantic to the United States had not travelled so successfully to the south-east. A grand gesture would be required to get his race across, Real decided. He promised to donate a prize, a gold cup.

Breal could have saved himself a few francs, as it happened. A race from Marathon was not only eagerly accepted, it was quickly regarded by the press with patriotic fervour - the one truly local event of the Games. The official program of the first modern Olympiad stated that the marathon was *'evidence of the Greek dedication to freedom as a nation, and the sacrifice of the individual to maintain that freedom'*. (Extract from *'The World of Marathons'* by Sandy Treadwell)

The Australian Thermopylae

Frank Devine The Australian 22 April 1991

'It is a pity Australia lacks the historians and poets of ancient Greece. The legend of the 300 Spartans who held the pass at Thermopylae against thousands of Persians has lived on for nearly 2,500 years.

'We had our Thermopylae, in which some 400 young men, their average age -

fought some 10,000 Japanese for seven weeks in July and August, 1942, and saved their country from enemy occupation.

'But they are almost entirely unremembered and unhonoured.

'When their part in the battle of the Kokoda Track, in New Guinea, was over, our Spartans had lost 137 killed in action, dead from wounds or disease or missing in action. Another 266 were wounded. Our Spartans entered their final great confrontation with the Japanese, at Isurava, on August 26, 1942, with their 150 fittest men out on patrols, chopping away at the Japanese as guerillas in mountainous jungle.

'Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Honner, of Sydney, now 86 and part-crippled by wounds inflicted at our Thermopylae, recalls that he had fewer than 200 men in a condition to stand in a defensive position to fight against the Japanese when they attacked at Isurava at the end of August. The heroic invalids held the attackers for three days, until the advance guard of an AIF brigade of battle-experienced, Middle East veterans who had just arrived in New Guinea came up the Kokoda Track from Port Moresby to relieve them.

'Even the AIF tough guys were forced by the desperate Japanese to retreat, though exacting a heavy toll for every metre they grudgingly gave up. On the night of September 17, the Japanese exhausted and on the edge of starvation, caught a distant glimpse of the lights of Port Moresby, target of their Kokoda campaign.

'They never got closer. Over the next two months the hard men of the AIF drove the Japanese back across the 2,000m ridges of the Owen Stanley Mountains. Our Spartans repaired and reinforced, joined the AIF on the east coast of New Guinea - the far side of the Owen Stanleys from Australia and fought fiercely again during the battles of Buna and Gona, in which the Japanese Kokoda force was finally crushed.

'The official name of our Spartans was the 39th Battalion. It was formed in Victoria of volunteers. A few militia conscripts sent to the 39th were asked whether they wanted to fight in New Guinea and were returned to their militia units if they said 'No' or sounded unequivocal.

'Though volunteers, the men of the 39th were militia, too, and thus scorned as 'chokoos' - chocolate soldiers - by the army professionals and members of the AIF. They had just two months of training before shipping out of Port Moresby. The 'chokoos' of the 39th Battalion were the first Australians ever to go into battle in direct defence of their homeland.

'The Japanese had intended to take Port Moresby by sea, but setbacks in the naval battles of Midway and the Coral Sea caused them to change their tactics. They landed their army at Buna on the east coast and moved to attack overland. The rain-bashed, precipitous, hostile terrain was more than they had bargained for.

'So, with bells on, was the tigerish opposition of the Australians. Apart from much greater numbers in the Kokoda campaign, the Japanese had mortars, cannon and heavy machine-guns, horses and an engineer battalion to cut paths in the mountainsides and bridge ravines and torrents.

'The Spartans, the 39th Battalion, the 'chokoos', had only rifles, hand-grenades and Bren light machine-guns. The one time they got a heavy machine-gun, a Vickers, into place, Japanese mortar fire brought down a tree which fell on the Vickers and smashed it.

'The Japanese expected to sweep upon Moresby with next to no resistance. Had they done so, they would have had a base from which to establish total naval and air domination of Australia's east coast, seizing territory there in due course at their leisure.

'How did our Spartans achieve their fantastic feat of arms? Basically, by acts of individual bravery whose recounting makes the back of the neck tingle. They fought the Japanese at such close quarters that on one occasion a Japanese climbing a tree in the dark grabbed hold of an Australian bayonet in mistake for a branch.

‘There isn’t room here to do justice to their heroism. Lex McAuley, a regular army officer- turned-novelist and historian, does justice to the heroes in a wonderful book called ‘Blood and Iron: The Battle for Kokoda’.

‘Why aren’t they a national legend?’

‘It is fair to point in McAuley’s book, as representative of our Spartans, to the noble action of Lieutenant H.W. Crawford. Japanese machine-gun fire drove fragments of metal from Crawford’s helmet so deeply into his head that it was impossible to remove the helmet. He was sent down the track with an escort of two men, whom his platoon could not afford, to find medical treatment.

‘A few hundred metres from the action, Crawford, bleeding and in agony, pulled his pistol and forced his escort to return to the battle. He stumbled down the track on his own and was never seen again.

‘McAuley, who spent two years in combat in Vietnam, believes one of the reasons our 400 or so Spartans fought so splendidly was that they had no choice. The Japanese had behaved savagely during the Pacific war to that stage and surrender was not an option. Nor was it an option to abandon a mate to capture. Medical treatment was days away: A wound was no reason to stop fighting.

‘Moreover, says McAuley, our young Spartans were only a couple of decades removed from Gallipoli. They were impelled, like the warriors of ancient Greece, to discover whether they were as brave as their fathers.

‘Having established that they were at least as brave, why are the young heroes of the 39th Battalion not pillars of Australian legend? McAuley blames General Douglas Macarthur, a self-publicist who totally controlled war news disseminated from and within Australia. Macarthur was lobbying Washington for American reinforcements and it suited his purpose to denigrate the fighting ability of Australians. His chief of staff, Major-General Richard Sutherland, described Australian soldiers as ‘*undisciplined, untrained, over advertised and useless*’.

‘I have personal reason to consider this bullshit. In 1967 in Tokyo, I interviewed Lieutenant- General Tsutomu Yoshihara, chief of staff of Japan’s South Seas army, who said of our Spartans: ‘*In the Kokoda battle their qualities of adaptability and individual initiative enabled them to show tremendous ability as fighting men in the jungle. They were superb*’.

‘Why have we let the triumph of the 39th Battalion slip from national legend? God alone knows. After 18 months in existence, the 39th was disbanded and its soldiers sent to other units. No echo remains of our glorious Spartans in Australia’s military structure.

‘What losses Australia inflicts upon itself by its neglect of past achievement. What vigour a clear memory of our Spartans at our Thermopylae would contribute to national self-esteem. The handful of 39th Battalion survivors are now, says Lex McAuley, ‘*just the old blokes at the bowling club*’.

‘Recently, the American journalist, Patrick Buchanan, argued that his country’s finest generation of the 20th century was the one born in the ‘20s whose members born in the Great Depression as children or teenagers, fought in World War 11 and created the prosperity of the 50s’.

‘When one considers the magnificence of the boy warriors of the 39th Battalion, it is easy to believe that this is Australia’s great generation, too.’

Kokoda: The Bloody Track

‘Imagine an area of approximately one hundred miles long. Crumple and fold this into a series of ridges, each rising higher and higher until seven thousand feet is reached, then declining in ridges to three thousand feet. Cover this thickly with jungle, short trees and tall trees, tangled with great, entwining savage vines. Through an oppression of this density, cut a little native track, two or three feet wide, up the ridges, over the spurs, round gorges and down across swiftly- flowing, happy mountain streams. Where the track clambers up the mountain sides, cut steps - big steps, little steps, steep steps - or clear the soil from the tree roots.

‘Every few miles, bring the track through a small patch of sunlit kunai grass, or an old deserted native garden, and every seven or ten miles, build a group of dilapidated grass huts - as staging shelters - generally set in a foul, offensive clearing. Every now and then, leave beside the track dumps of discarded, putrefying food, occasional dead bodies and human fouling’s. In the morning, flicker the sunlight through the tall trees, flutter green and blue and purple and white butterflies lazily through the air, and hide birds of deep-throated song, or harsh cockatoos, in the foliage.

‘About midday, and through the night, pour water over the forest, so that the steps become broken, and a continual yellow stream flows downwards, and the few level areas become pools and puddles of putrid black mud. In the high ridges above Myola, drip this water day and night over the track through a fetid forest grotesque with moss and glowing phosphorescent fungi.’

Col Kinglsey Norris, E.D., M.D., A.D.M.S., 7th Division, September 1942

To ensure that this work has not been wasted, arrange for a bloody battle to be fought on the tracks in the thick jungle, amid the vines. Finally, give the battle and track a name - KOKODA!

Tribute to the Australian Digger

Extract from 'Green Armour' by wartime journalist/author, Osmar White

'At Eora I saw a 20-year-old redheaded boy with shrapnel in his stomach. He kept muttering to himself about not being able to see the blasted Japs. When Eora was to be evacuated, he knew he had little chance of being shifted back up the line. He called to me, confidentially: "*Hey, dig, bend down a minute. Listen . . . I think us blokes are going to be left when they pull out. Will you do us a favour? Scrounge us a tommy gun from somewhere will you?*"

'It was not bravado. You could see that by looking into his eyes. He just wanted to see a Jap before he died. That was all.

'Such things should have been appalling. They were not appalling. One accepted them calmly. This was jungle war - the most merciless war of all.

'I was convinced for all time of the dignity and nobility of common men. I was convinced for all time that common men have a pure and shining courage when they fight for what they believe to be a just cause.

'That which was fine in these men outweighed and made trivial all that was horrible in their plight. I cannot explain it except to say that they were at all times cheerful and helped one another. They never gave up the fight.

They never admitted defeat. They never asked for help.

'I felt proud to be of their race and cause, bitterly ashamed to be so nagged by the trivial ills of my own flesh. I wondered if all men, when they had endured so much that exhausted nerves would no longer give response, were creatures of the spirit, eternal and indestructible as stars.'

Commemorating War – Honouring Peace

There are those who would be critical of this proposal because of a view that it seeks to glorify war. Others may be sensitive to the reaction of the Japanese.

In anticipation of these concerns it should be noted that members of the 39th Australian Militia Battalion and the Japanese 144th South Seas Regiment who fought against each other at Isurava have been holding joint commemoration services since 1979. These services alternate between Australia and Japan.

These were young men fighting for the national values of their respective countries at the time. Having experienced the horrors of war they do not want their children or their grandchildren to endure what was thrust upon them at the time. They want them to live in peace.

They meet to honour the respective sacrifices of their comrades and to make a small contribution to the ongoing maintenance of a peaceful relationship.

The Olympic Torch Relay across Kokoda is not about 'glorifying war' - it is about honouring service and sacrifice.

Olympic torch idea for Kokoda

By SALLY MACMILLAN

THE Olympic torch should be carried across the famous Kokoda Trail on its way to the Sydney Olympics, an MP says.

And those who bear it should be the descendants of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels who helped Australian troops during the war.

"Kokoda is sacred ground for Australia," said Liberal MLC Charlie Lynn. "The carriage of the torch through the remote battle sites of Kokoda, Denki, Isurava, Templeton's Crossing, Mission Ridge, Brigade Hill, Forabaiwa Ridge and down the golden staircase of Imita Ridge would be a wonderful tribute to those who sacrificed their lives for the freedom we enjoy in Australia today."

Lynn, whose leadership school treks across the track have helped its villages with medical, communication and education aid, says such a passage would be a way of saying thanks.

Papua New Guinea was Australian territory during the war years. The Kokoda Trail was the only gateway available to the Japanese for their invasion of Australia.

Just a handful of Diggers stood between the Japanese and their objective.

"The torch would be carried by the grandsons of the Kloari—the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels—who live in the villages across Kokoda," Mr Lynn said.

"We have never really said thank you to these wonderful people who saved so many Australian lives during the Kokoda campaign.

"They have not yet been paid nor have they even received a medal for their services.

The honour of carry-



Leader: Charlie Lynn

ing the Olympic torch across the same notorious track that their grandfathers carried our Diggers would be a fitting tribute to the sacrifices they made.

"The torch would focus world attention on the significance of Kokoda. It is an indictment on our education system that Australian children know more about The Alamo than they do about Isurava.

"American folk heroes such as Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone and Jim Bowie are household names whilst real Australian heroes such as Bruce Kingsbury, VC, Charlie McCallum, D.C.M. and Lindsay Bear, D.C.M. M.M. are unknown."

Re-tracking Kokoda: P143

Torch's trail in question

LIBERAL MLC Charlie Lynn this week accused SOCOG officials of either trying to hoodwink the public over the Olympic torch relay route or not knowing what was going on in its organisation.

"I recently submitted a detailed proposal to SOCOG for the Olympic torch relay to be carried across the Kokoda Track on its way to the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney," Mr Lynn said.

"SOCOG's chief executive officer Sandy Hollway responded that SOCOG took the decision not to include the track in the route for the Sydney 2000 Olympic torch relay.

"The Sydney Morning Herald reported that a delegation of Kloari people from villages along the Kokoda Track were visiting Sydney to meet SOCOG and government representatives to discuss the plan.

A spokesman for SOCOG reported they

received the proposal "but a decision on the Olympic torch's route would not be made until next year".

Mr Lynn said this was a cruel response to people who gave so much for us in our hour of need in 1942, because it built up a false expectation. "I do not accept the reasons given by SOCOG for rejecting this proposal," he said.

"If we cannot handle the logistical complexity of including it, then we should be starting to question SOCOG's ability to manage the world's most complex sporting event in 2000.

"I plan to begin an Australia-wide advertising campaign to convince SOCOG that Australians want to include the track in the relay as a tribute to those who made such great sacrifices for the peace and prosperity we enjoy today.

"People are invited to write to Mr Sandy Hollway, GPO Box 2000, Sydney 2001 to express their support."