Cooper Lack's life-changing trek

Bairnsdale Secondary College student Cooper Lack recently trekked the Kokoda Trail as part of the Arthur Grassby Scholarship, with eight other East Gippslanders and 34 students from around the state.

This is his experience:

Not long after I landed in Port Moresby, my cheeks were red from the heat and my pores leaked with sweat as I started to think: how did Charlie do what I am about to do?

Charlie Irvine was a soldier from the 2/14th Infantry Battalion from East Gippsland.

Like all the students who trekked, we "carried" a soldier across the trail – a photo and information about family and war service - and he was mine.

I think back to when I said goodbye to my family in Melbourne, all excited for me to have this opportunity, and I feel grateful that they did not have to worry, like Charlie's family did, about whether the journey would be a matter of life and death.

I snap out of my daydreaming state to, " next please."

The sound comes from a face with kind eyes, which meet mine as I walk up to customs.

As I leave the airport, the humidity and smell of the air are nothing like home.

The enormity of what I was about to do, and the fact I was to walk in his footsteps, did not fade. It was just straight uncomfortable.

Coming to the hotel where we stayed the night before we trekked, I thought that despite how simple it was, it was luxury compared to what Charlie would have experienced.

He would have been told where to go, what to do and who to kill.

But amid those instructions, he would have been thinking about what could happen to himself.

He had left his family to fight alongside people, many of whom he'd never met but who would soon become brothers in a life-and-death situation as they confronted the Japanese.

They were there to defend Australia and hoped they would get to go home see their families again, feel the warm hugs from their mums and see the tears of joy.

For Charlie, sadly, this would not happen.

While he would survive Kokoda, he was killed shortly after just north of the village as the Australians attempted to drive the Japanese from the northern beaches.

He and many others laid down their lives for Australia and will always be remembered as the heroes who helped save our country.

He never got to see his friends or family again. Was he thinking of his family when he was killed?

Was he killed instantly, or did he suffer?

These are all thoughts that crossed my mind.

I hope he knew just how appreciative I, and all Australians, are of him for what he did.

It was soon time to head down for our meal and final pre-trek briefing, and we were served a great feed.

The next day we were up early and headed off, arriving at McDonald's Corner, where the boys had started from in 1942.

We then drove a further 11 kilometres to Owers' Corner, where the track officially commences today as the road has been extended by that distance.

It was here we met our porters – mine was John.

He was 33 and had two kids, aged 12 and three.

He was 21 when he had his first child and 30 when he had his second. He has a wife, a very soft voice and is a religious man, a Seventh-day Adventist.

John was very kind and devoted to his family. We would grow to become quite good friends over the trek. He hopes his kids can move to a different country and have a better life.

Many of the porters are descendants of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels who helped our soldiers, and John's great-grandfather was one.

It took six Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels to carry one wounded soldier back to Owers' Corner and often 10 days to get all the way there.

This should never be forgotten.

When I took the first step on the trail, I had that cold-shower feeling, knowing I was now walking in the footsteps of Charlie.

The same thoughts kept coming back to me: was he scared or calm as he set off?

I was nervous but looking forward to understanding more about his war.

We stopped at the first village for lunch and everyone came out to say hello.

Heaps of kids were excited to see the "white man", which is what they referred to us as before we told them our names.

They were so happy with so little. A pencil was like a new phone to them; it showed me how much appreciation they have for the little things. After six kilometres in the heat on the first day, I was already soaked in sweat.



Cooper Lack sitting at the grave of Charlie Irvine at Bomana War Cemetery.

Conversation with John was hard at the start as he was shy, but he would open up as the days passed.

He would later tell me how he would like to see his kids do great things and make their village proud.

The second day was hard, hot and humid, with all of us completing 23 kilometres and some big and tough climbs up Imita and Ioribaiwa Ridges.

I was counting down the hours. I wanted a break, but I knew Charlie didn't get a break, so I pushed on without complaint.

As the inclines got steeper and the jungle became harder to move through, I realised how easy I had it compared to Charlie.

We reached camp and my clothes were again soaked with sweat, as they would be every day, often before daylight.

The cold creek was my shower, and it was amazing to feel clean.

The next morning I woke up at 3.57am to the sound of the village roosters.

We weren't getting up until 5am, but I could not rest any more, being a little scared of the tough day of hiking we were warned we had in front of us.

I had the thought in the back of my mind that it was not going to get easy until the last day when we had a short walk from the last village into Kokoda, so knew I had to push through the tough parts.

I also knew I had it easier than Charlie did.

For starters, no one was shooting at me. I had no worries about someone taking my life away with one pull of a trigger, or because of one mistake by me.

We eventually finished day three with another 22 kilometres done.

On day four we would reach halfway and the day after see the other group that was trekking north to south. Because we had so many students, we had to split into two groups, with one going each way.

Brigade Hill was a tough climb to a special area where many were killed, and then it was down to Efogi to camp, which was the halfway point.

It ended up being my favourite day as I got to play rugby with the locals and listen to them talk about their connection to this land.

When we met the other group for lunch the next day, I saw my new mate Cohen from Warragul.

He was the guy who shared the hotel room with me, and we got along quite well. Over time, he became a great friend who I'm still taking to.

For a while, I wondered what was in store for us doing the second half. Was it going to be as hard as what we had just gone through, or easier?

I had blisters the size of my toes, but I knew this was nothing compared to what the soldiers endured, so I didn't think to complain.

I don't remember much about day six, but by now I didn't want to go home at all.

I loved learning about this beautiful country and what our men went through.

Day seven was the second-last day, and all my clothes were dirty, but I didn't care.

I was just happy to be there. I didn't care how tall the hill was. I just loved this country, but also knew the land we were walking on was where men had sacrificed their lives for us.

I was overwhelmed with this feeling of clarity that I was on a battlefield.

It was a very peaceful feeling, and there was no voice in my head questioning whether I could do it.

On those final days, blisters and all, I knew I would complete this for Charlie.

He will always be remembered by me and his family, and the country we call home - Australia - now has an even more special place in my heart.

I hope to always honour Charlie as well as I can by the way I live the rest of my life.

On the final day we were woken at 4.30am to start the walk to Kokoda. We had an early breakfast waiting for us there, and we were all excited to get there.

There was sadness in that final walk, as I didn't want to leave John, my porter. I didn't want to leave this amazing country, where I had loved every second.

I was overwhelmed with emotion about the fact I'd just walked in the soldiers' footsteps.

We then flew back to Port Moresby and visited Bomana War Cemetery, where I could finally sit with the man I'd just walked for, the man who put his life before everyone else.

The least I could do was say my thanks.

I sat down at Charlie's grave and thanked him and made a promise to him that I will keep his name and story alive wherever I go.



John presenting Cooper with a memento pole he made marking their trip together.

Riviera Pumps & Generators
679 Princes Hwy, Bairnsdale VIC 3875
Phone: (03) 5152 7273
YOUR ONE STOP PUMP SHOP

Proud partner:
ONGA pump shop

Tree Pruning & Removal · Stump Grinding · Weed Spraying · Forestry Mulching · Slashing
Get a free quote today, call
1300 BAT BRO
Email us: kyle@battbrothers.com | Phone: 1300 228 276
Find out more: www.battbrothers.com
batt brothers
VEGETATION MANAGEMENT