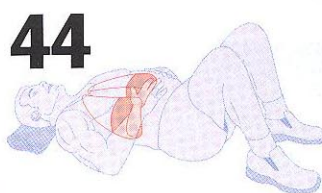
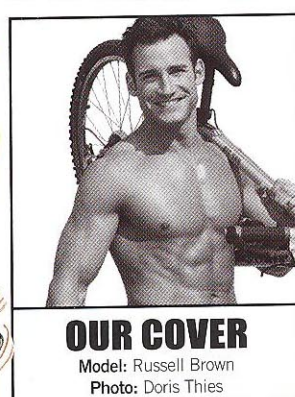
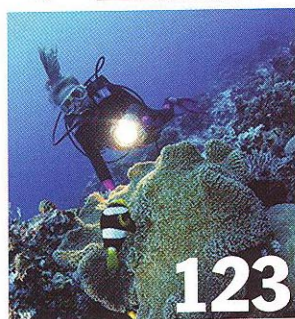
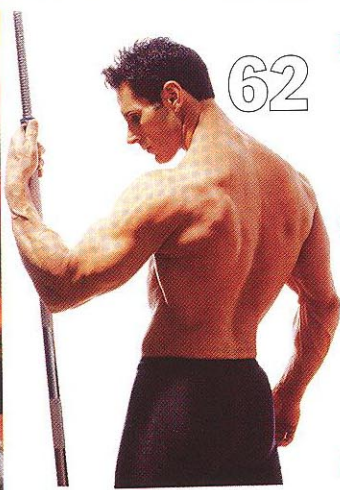
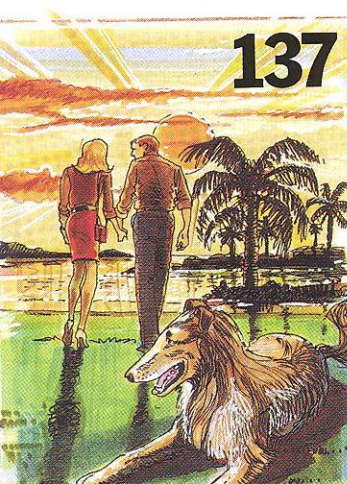
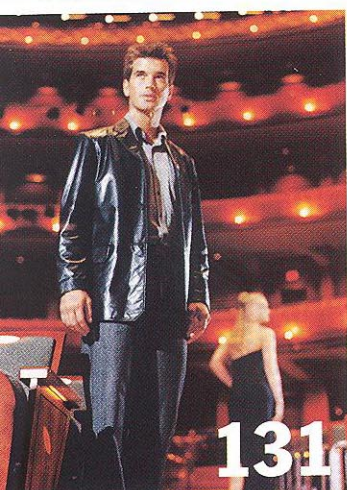
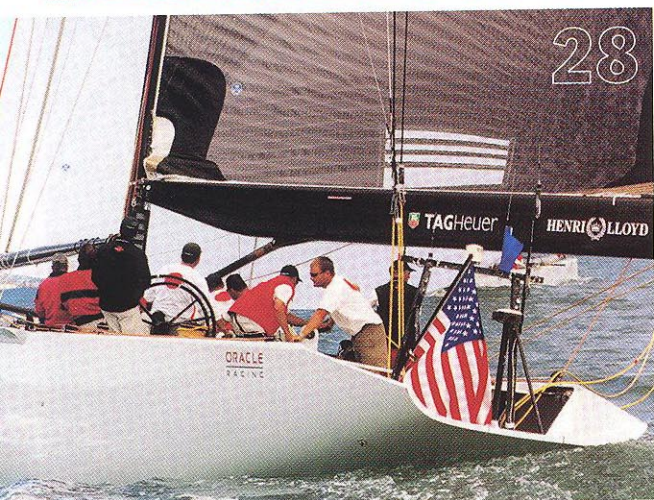


Men's Health



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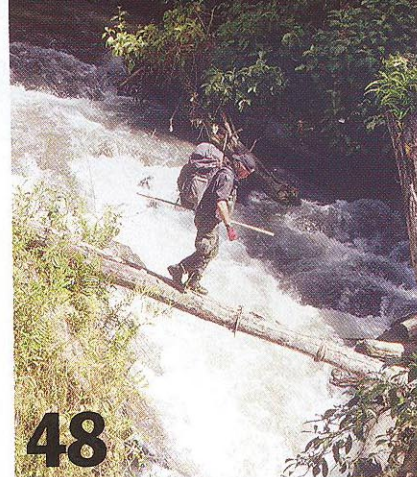
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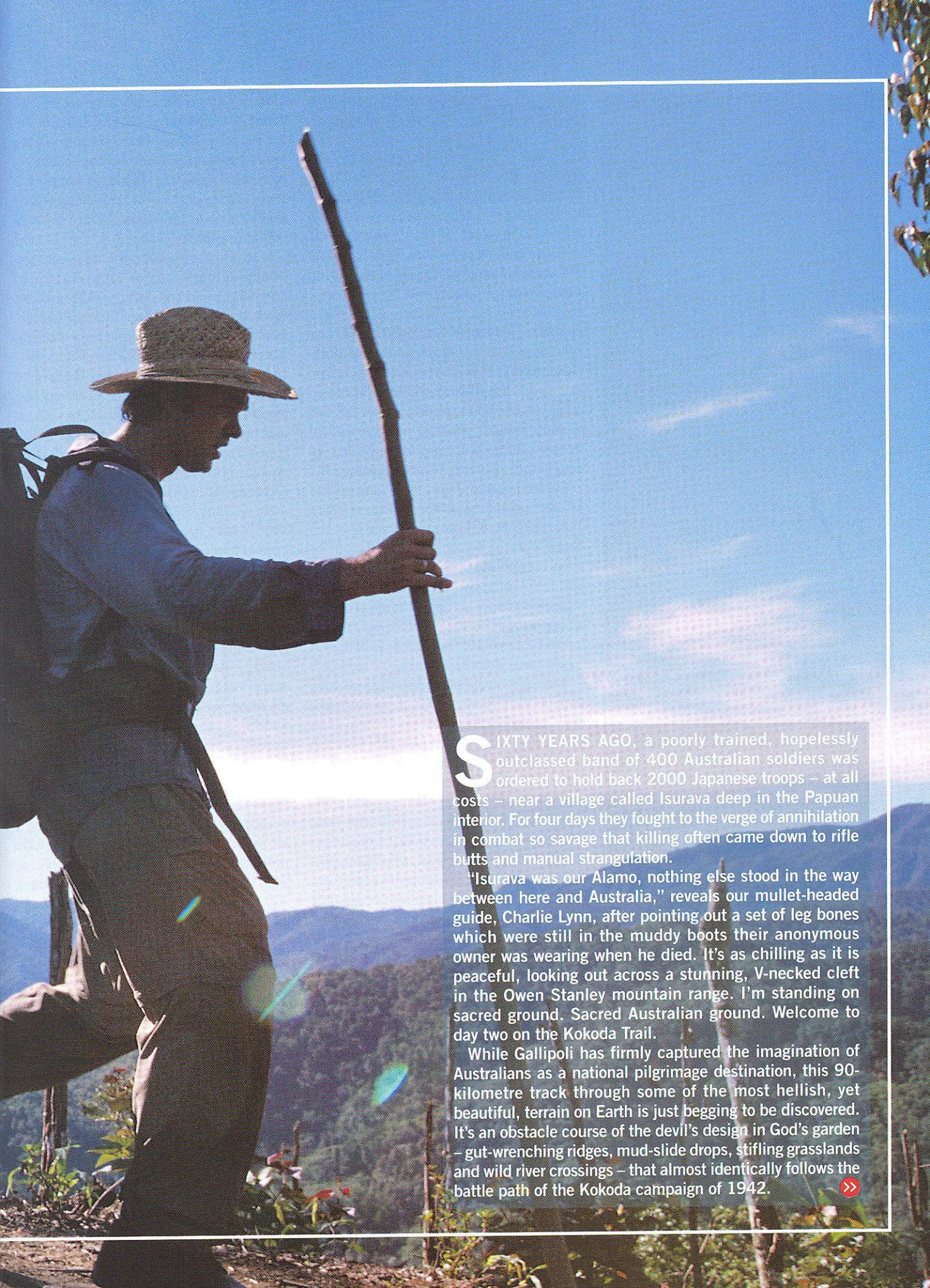


Men's Health Challenge
WE DARE YOU TO TRY THIS

KOKODA

Hard. Painful. Rewarding. Welcome to Australia's Alamo

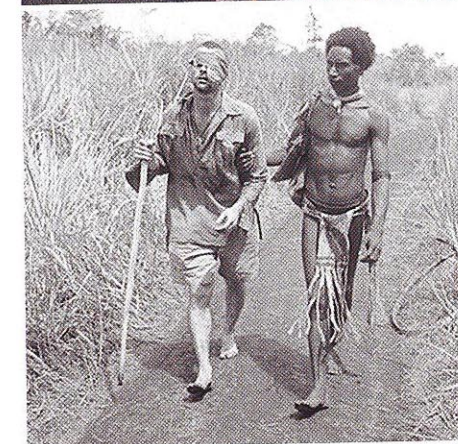
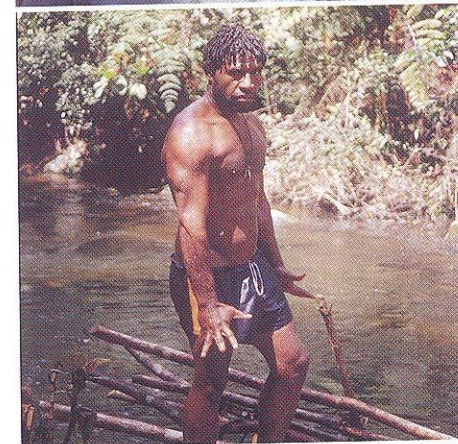
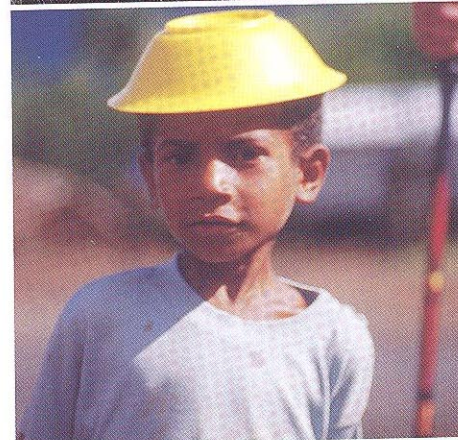
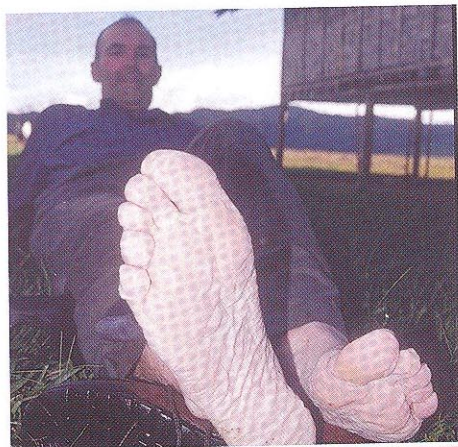
BY MIKE BUTLER



SIXTY YEARS AGO, a poorly trained, hopelessly outclassed band of 400 Australian soldiers was ordered to hold back 2000 Japanese troops – at all costs – near a village called Isurava deep in the Papuan interior. For four days they fought to the verge of annihilation in combat so savage that killing often came down to rifle butts and manual strangulation.

"Isurava was our Alamo, nothing else stood in the way between here and Australia," reveals our mullet-headed guide, Charlie Lynn, after pointing out a set of leg bones which were still in the muddy boots their anonymous owner was wearing when he died. It's as chilling as it is peaceful, looking out across a stunning, V-necked cleft in the Owen Stanley mountain range. I'm standing on sacred ground. Sacred Australian ground. Welcome to day two on the Kokoda Trail.

While Gallipoli has firmly captured the imagination of Australians as a national pilgrimage destination, this 90-kilometre track through some of the most hellish, yet beautiful, terrain on Earth is just begging to be discovered. It's an obstacle course of the devil's design in God's garden – gut-wrenching ridges, mud-slide drops, stifling grasslands and wild river crossings – that almost identically follows the battle path of the Kokoda campaign of 1942. >>



WANT A TWO-WEEK holiday where you can eat what you like and return to work leaner and tougher than when you left? Where you'll easily drink six litres of water a day, be in bed by eight and learn, first-hand, about character, mateship and courage at a critical time in Australia's history? This is it.

If the pedicures weren't so bad (blisters and trench foot are real problems), it could almost pass for a health spa.

A quick history lesson: July 1942

On December 7, 1941, Japan thumped the Americans at Pearl Harbor, then forced the surrender of British, Australian and Indian forces at Singapore in February 1942. For months about 15,000 Japanese troops had been pouring south in preparation for an invasion of Australia. They landed on the northern coast of Papua New Guinea and started advancing down a native track to Port Moresby, across a country still in the Stone Age.

In the middle of that track, at a village called Kokoda, they swamped Australian defences, starting a five-month campaign of jungle warfare that marked the turning point of the Pacific War because it was Japan's first defeat on land.

Kokoda is also where I start the walk back to Moresby, following the route of Australia's fighting retreat with a group of 35 trekkers and porters who've been piled into planes so small that they have to weigh each person before deciding how many they could take.

Quite frankly, our group isn't particularly impressive, looking about as athletic as sacks of potatoes, compared to our indigenous porters. Our trek leader, Charlie Lynn, a cheery, former major-cum-politician, joyfully announces the start of "a great little trek. There'll be a couple of speed bumps, a few swims and a bit of fun".

One of the three women asks how hard it really is. He replies: "Mate, by the end, you'll be so fit you'll have muscles in your shit!" Charming.

A couple of days into the trek, I find out that Charlie first came to Kokoda in the early Eighties with plans to establish an

ultra marathon (he eventually set up the Sydney-to-Melbourne one instead). Charlie is the sort of bloke who describes a two-hour slog up a 700-metre ridge as a "little gem of a pinch". This is a worst-case scenario: two days into a nine-day trek, I realise we are being led by an ex-army endurance freak.

However, he does have a near-encyclopaedic knowledge of the Kokoda campaign and wraps eye-watering stories around seemingly nondescript tracts of jungle, turning them into living flashes of old documentary footage, where men died fighting over patches of land the size of tennis courts in the middle of one of the biggest wildernesses on Earth.

It would be easy to forget the 20th century ever came here at all, until you find your boot stubbing a 60-year-old mortar, grenade or gun part rusting into the soil.

Day three: a trekking pecking order has emerged as our band straggles out across a couple of kilometres. There's one guy who's shooting ahead (he's using it as a precursor for an Everest expedition) and it extends down the line to a wheezy RSL president somewhere in his fifties.

I'd be lying if I said the first few days are a doddle. Notes on the map include cues like: "Leeches"; "Slippery and boggy"; and "Steep climbing" and our bodies have been acclimatising to altitudes higher than Kosciuszko and walks lasting eight hours.

But I'm happy. My body is toughening up like it hasn't done for years and, while camped by a gushing mountain river, I look into a jungle wild with fireflies and ponder a curious feeling in my shoes. It feels like my feet are on freshly cut grass. "Quite pleasant really," I think, as I fall asleep, exhausted and satisfied.

Day four: I'm not happy. I wake with a rash crawling up my leg and the previously pleasant feeling on my feet now feels painfully unpleasant. "You've got a beauty there," says Charlie sounding all Steve Erwin-like. "Foot fungus. This cream will get rid of it." So I spend the day sloshing around in sweat and Savlon, plodding through a moss-covered forest that looks like something out of *Lord of the Rings*.

It's a surreal landscape, with emerald mosses draped everywhere and technicolour fungi clinging to Pandanus palms so big you walk through their roots. It would be

From the top: nine days on the trail takes a heavy toll on your feet; a young villager; a local man building a bridge; and fuzzy wuzzy angel Raphael Oimbari guides a blinded private, George Whittington, along the track.

beautiful – if you didn't have something like ground glass in your boots and a pack that felt like a wet cement bag on your back.

It's somewhere near this spot that a man called Ken Laycock – the grandfather of a bloke called Nick in our expedition – was injured in 1942. His diary reads: "I was wounded in the lower left leg and after putting a field dressing on I attempted to use my rifle as a crutch so that I could hobble . . . but it was too short so I discarded it. One of the men dumped his pack and carried me out on his back, except that in difficult downhill sections I hopped on one leg from tree to tree."

It took Ken Laycock nine weeks to get back to Moresby, so I stopped whingeing and smeared more cream on my rashed feet.

Day six: spread of rash stops at the knees and ground-glass feeling disappears. Hurrah! It's a pity that by 2pm the skies open with a thumping downpour to turn the track into a slithering yellow torrent. We slop into Naduri village, one of the handful along the Track and are greeted by the inhabitants singing hymns like something from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. These are the grandchildren of the fuzzy wuzzy angels, the native bearers who saved Australia's wounded from certain death in the jungle by carrying them for up to nine weeks.

Patrick Lindsay, author of *The Spirit of Kokoda*, said to me afterwards: "It was them who won the war for us."

Later on we meet one, Ovuru Indiki. He's a frail bag of skin and bones and plays down what he did. It's like meeting Gandhi – a completely humbling experience. Our government has never paid them, awarded them medals or officially recognised what they did because "they weren't serving personnel". It's disgusting.

While it's true that places like Port Moresby are virtually lawless, people from these isolated villages along the track are utterly disarming in their gentleness. They live in a peculiar world where the nearest car is days away and the closest things to the 20th century are the light aircraft that use their tiny landing strips. Some of the old people still call helicopters "Mixmasters from Jesus".

Oddly enough, they're mad about Rugby League, with Alfie Langer and Andrew Johns regarded as gods. Give a village elder a footy jersey and you'll be remembered forever.

From the top: Kokoda Trail guide Charlie Lynn with an old mortar; legendary fuzzy wuzzy angel Ovuru Indiki; crossing one of the many rivers; Sergeant Gordon Ayre helps one of the walking wounded, Private William Johnson.

Day seven: is hell. Walked till 11pm through rain, boot-sucking mud and across rivers that would sweep you into oblivion if you slipped. When I hit my (wet) pillow, I'm hallucinating about chopper lift outs and have started to hate anybody who has chocolate left in their ration packs.

I've had enough dehydrated food to last a lifetime and start flicking through the *Do-It-Yourself Guide to Kokoda's* section on "How to catch and cook local game (in emergencies only)". For python, it says: "It's important not to grab them until awakened. To do so will result in a reflex reaction and it will wrap around you." I dream it's wrapping around Charlie.

Day eight: there's nothing like a 700m climb with 11 false peaks to build mental fortitude and that's what we've got to clear before 10am. I hate Charlie "What a beauty of a hill!" Lynn and all this mullet-headed dinosaur stands for. However, when he asks how I'm going, I'm too knackered to wheeze anything more than "Okay". Damn! But I don't care, a countdown of days has now become hours and everyone in Camp Kokoda is starting to grin dementedly at the thought of finishing our "holiday".

Day nine: By 3pm, our motley crew stumble out of the jungle to be greeted with cold beers and a rusted truck that'll take us back to Port Moresby. We're all kilos lighter, have legs like mountaineers and quite possibly *do* have muscles in our shit. We've also done one of the world's great treks that 60 years ago was Australia's make-or-break point in world history.

I've never had a harder, more satisfying and moving nine days in my life. "If Gallipoli was the birth of our nation, Kokoda was our confirmation. It's something that should never be forgotten," observes Charlie.

And if you ever walk the Track, you'll know exactly what he means.

» Charlie Lynn's tours cost \$3800, ex-Sydney. Treks using local guides cost \$2060. Call Niugini Holidays on (1300) 850 020 for more information.

