

NEWS

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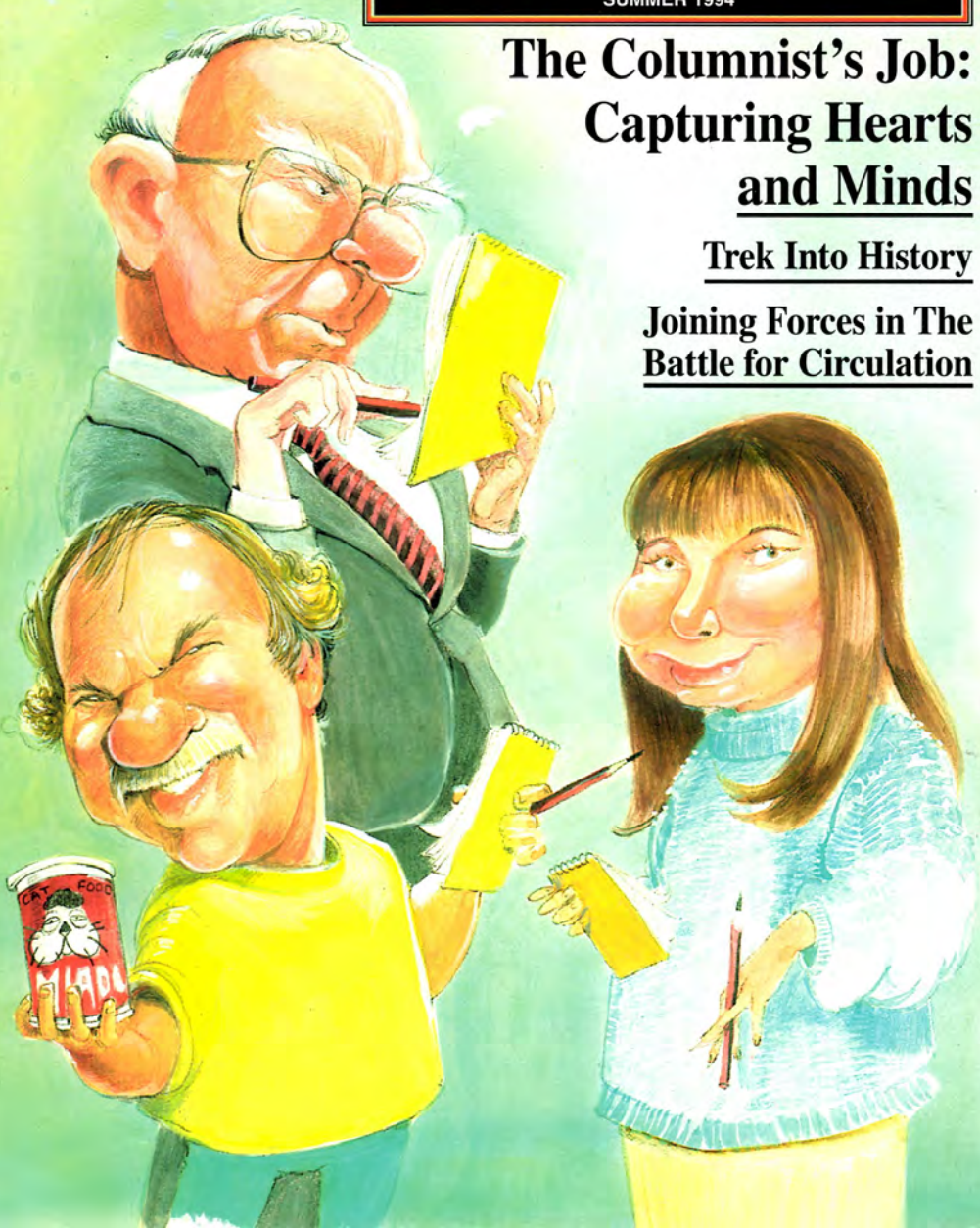
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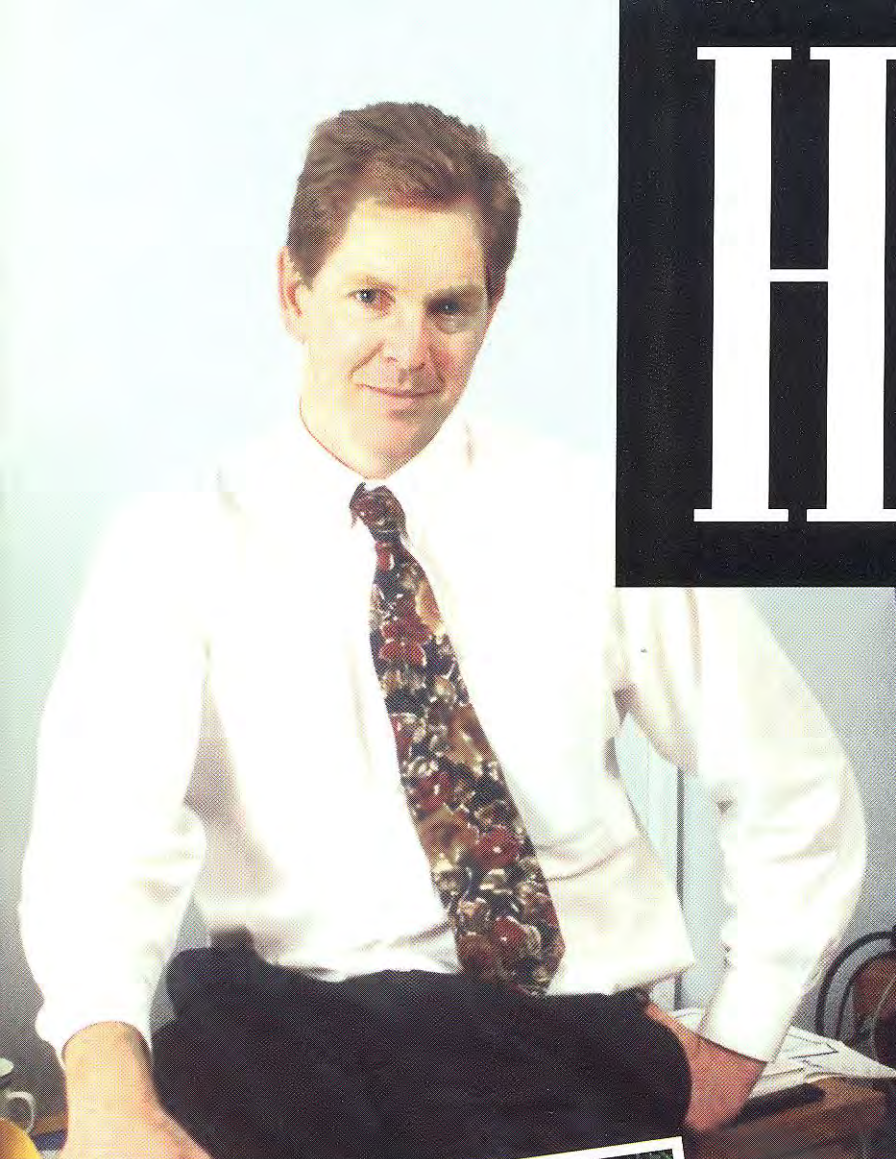
The Columnist's Job: Capturing Hearts and Minds

Trek Into History

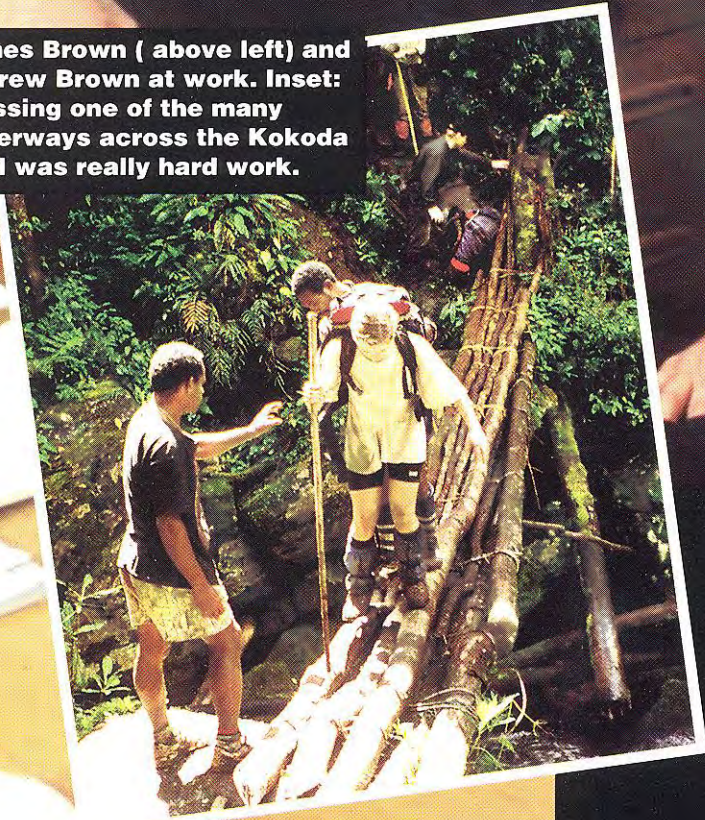
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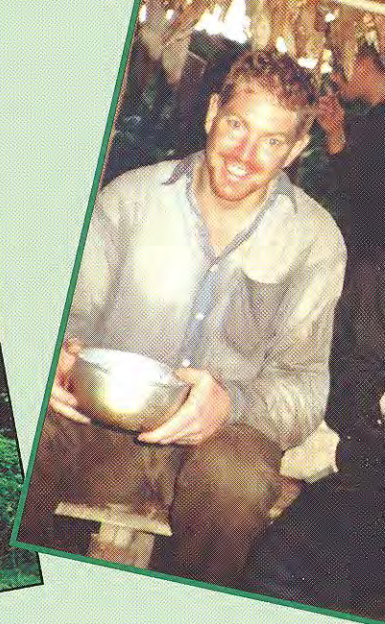
II TREK INTO HISTORY



James Brown (above left) and Andrew Brown at work. Inset: Crossing one of the many waterways across the Kokoda Trail was really hard work.



Two young News Limited financial managers faced unexpected challenges when they decided to walk the infamous Kokoda Trail.



Above: an exuberant group at the end of the trail; Centre: chow time for James and Andrew; and Far Left: navigating another fast-flowing stream.

News Limited Company Treasurer, Andrew Brown and Group Financial Accountant, James Brown sit in their offices dressed in appropriate style — dark suits, crisp white shirts, discreet ties. They look... well, orderly.

It is hard to imagine them slogging knee-deep through swamps, sliding down steep, muddy embankments in a tangle of vines, sweat pouring off them in what seemed a constant stream, wearing the same clothes more than one day in a row and washing infrequently. Not willingly, anyway.

However the two Browns (no relation) recently returned from a 'genuine adventure', a seven-day endurance trek to relive the experiences of the Australian fighting forces in World War II along the infamous Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea.

The Kokoda Trail is little more than a walking track that passes over the rugged Owen Stanley Ranges from the town of Gona and Buna on the northern coast through the Kokoda Pass to Port Moresby.

When the Japanese landed in Gona in 1942 and began their push to take Port Moresby, via the Kokoda Trail, they engaged in some of the fiercest jungle warfare with the Australian and PNG forces.

The trek undertaken by James and Andrew is a regular event organised by Charles Lynn, of Kokoda Spirit, who is, according to James, 'very passionate about the Australian fighting man and the history of Kokoda'.

Lynn, a retired army major and former race director of the Westfield Sydney-to-Melbourne marathon, has done the trek eight times.

James Brown and Andrew Brown heard about the trek and decided to take up the challenge themselves.

The trek group of 30 people, the largest group Charles Lynn has taken along the trail, also included 12 men from the Australian Defence Force Academy, lawyers from Sydney firm Blake, Dawson & Waldren, staff from CRA and Prudential-Bache, an

American Army liaison officer as well as local porters.

They flew to Popondata, in the Owen Stanley Ranges, where they spent the first night. They realised they were 'in trouble' when Lynn told them the trek would start at 3 a.m. the next morning.

It was the dry season when the group walked the trail. "There were a lot of streams we could just wade through but in the wet season the streams are much deeper and quicker. Then you must stop, throw across saplings and build a bridge," Andrew said.

Even though it was the dry season, it rained most afternoons. "We were permanently wet from our sweat or the rain," James said.

Throughout much of the trek, the group hauled themselves up and down steep, muddy inclines. Said Andrew: "I think downhill is probably the hardest bit, because you have to concentrate on every step, it is just so steep."

After one day of extremely heavy rain, the group got a taste of mud sliding. "Climbing up the slopes was almost impossible but we would jump on our backpacks and slide down them.

"It is quite dangerous; one of the army blokes — some of them were a bit gungho — jumped on his backpack and slid straight down. The trouble was there was a small bend which he couldn't quite take. He went straight over the edge, hit a tree and got stuck. No-one could help pull him off because we couldn't get a grip ourselves," James said. "Eventually, he managed to claw his way back on to the track."

James and Andrew said that in the seven day trek over steep and difficult mountains, they climbed the equivalent of Mount Everest.

"There are places where you can walk two abreast but there are other places where it is quite uncomfortable because the path has receded into the earth and is only about one footprint wide," Andrew said.

Much of the trek was under the jungle canopy with only two forays into open, flat swamp land. James said he expected the jungle to be lush and more obviously full of wildlife. "I had a leech on me — that was the closest I came to the wildlife," he



said. The two men were also surprised to find little surviving tribal culture. "The village people were friendly and the children sang for us. But their culture seems to have been sterilised by the missionaries. All the villagers wore Western clothes and we saw few artifacts," James commented.

According to Andrew, the personal challenge of the trek gave them a chance to extend themselves, "to learn not only how well you can handle conditions but also whether you can do something as tough and torturous as that."

Andrew and James agree that while the trek was physically tough, the mental challenge was the most difficult.

"You knew you would be walking all day and sometimes after dark; you knew it was going to be tough and you had to concentrate all the time," Andrew said. "Mentally, it was very demanding; you faced the same thing day after day. We got up at 4 am, put our clothes on in the dark, had breakfast in the dark, packed up in the dark and by the time it was getting light, we would be walking. We walked all day and knew that we might still be walking after dark."

They also agreed that one of the worst aspects was Charlie Lynn's habit of saying that any particular destination was only half an hour away.

"I found it very off-putting but Charlie's rationale was that it did not matter. Time was irrelevant. You were going to get there and what did it matter if you were going to get there in two hours or three hours," James said.

The worst time came on the third day of trekking. By day's end, the group was exhausted from struggling over mudslides and steep hills.

"The whole day Charlie had been saying 'half an hour, half an hour'. At one point, we saw ahead what looked like six or seven kilometres of nice, green, flat ground," Andrew said.

But the seemingly flat ground was a difficult, muddy swamp that they ended up crossing in the dark.

Apart from occasional low points, he saw the trek

as "an opportunity to look at the history of the Australian Army in World War II. It gave us an appreciation of what it would have been like."

Both Andrew and James found that, towards the end of the trek, mundane things like having a pair of dry socks, a hot shower and a cooked meal seemed inordinately wonderful.

"At the end though, everyone was really chuffed at what we had achieved," Andrew said, "and we did pat ourselves on the back."

TIME TO REMEMBER

Two years ago, on the 50th anniversary of the recapture of the village Kokoda by a handful of young Australian soldiers, Sally Macmillan, a senior feature writer on the Sydney *Sunday Telegraph*, joined a special nine-day trek along the Kokoda Track.

The arduous remembrance trek undertaken by Sally, and others, celebrated the courageous three-month battle for Kokoda which ended in the Australian forces forcing the Japanese across the Owen Stanley Ranges and into the sea.

Here is an excerpt from Sally's report of the trek: "The going is agony. Alien territory, tortuous, gut-wrenching. The cloying jungle seeps into you, radiating waves of body heat. You go on automatic pilot, using the one-two shuffle that will become a monotonous tread to the end.

"Like the Diggers, you become attached to your lifesaver — the hacked-from-the-jungle, body-length stick that propels you up and staves

you down. Me and my blister protector — a gardening glove

—

become close on the every-steepening ascent to Ioribaiwa Ridge. There is a false crest and another and another.

"The jungle is still, the air fetid, the canopy enveloping. . . the track has no reason. It shoots up the highest ridges, plummets down the deepest ravines, crosses the longest spurs. In parts it is but a foothold wide, flanked only by air and ferns. You teeter across, not daring to look down, or cling to tree roots in cliffs as the pathway vanishes. . .

"The never-ending journey does have an end. . . we have followed in the footsteps of those who went before, and emerged from it with respect and awe."

