

SWANS CONQUER KOKODA

By Stephen Brassel

It's late December and following a torrid pre-season a young footballers' fancy invariably turns to relaxation and the one, or two, celebratory ales the dietician allows over Christmas and the New Year.

The season proper isn't too far off when training resumes and this cherished time over the festive season is as much a reward for the hard yards of the previous two months as an opportunity to recharge the batteries for an all out assault on the ultimate prize come September.

However, for six of our young Swans, it was instead an occasion to rest their weary bones and reflect after the most arduous and emotional six days of their lives.

For the "dirty half dozen" it all started on December 16 when Andrew Schauble, Leo Barry, Rowan Warfe, Brett Kirk, Gerrard Bennett and Ryan O'Keefe flew out of Sydney for an adventure that had the capacity to impact greatly on their future.

The six were going to walk the Kokoda Trail, following in the footsteps of those remarkable young men who had repelled the might of the Japanese army during World War II.

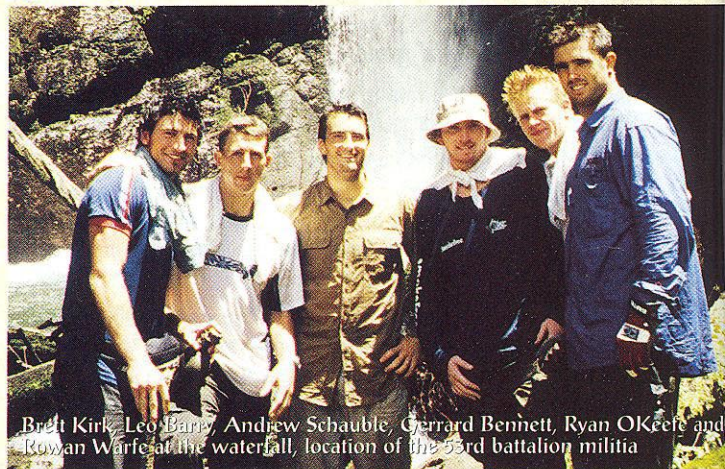
In the case of Brett Kirk this trek was to be even more compelling as his grandfather, Wally Moras, had survived Kokoda nearly 60 years prior.

The players, led by Charlie Lynn MLC, a former SAS soldier and noted Kokoda historian, had to endure tremendous physical and mental fatigue but ultimately they finished their 112km journey in just six days.

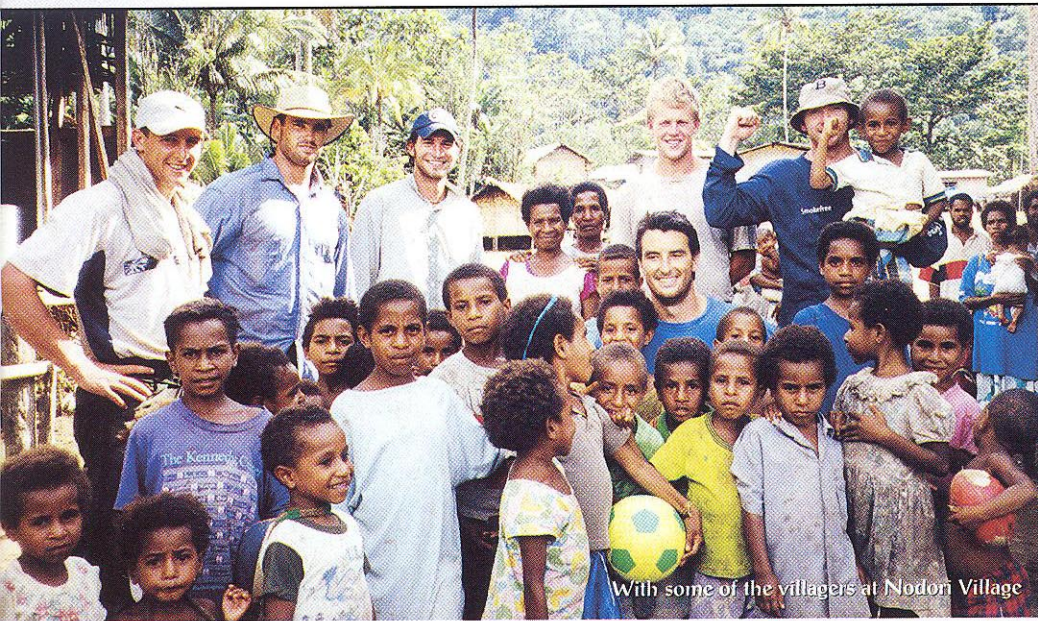
It was an experience none will ever forget and each firmly believes

they have come out of the jungle a better and more complete person.

In this article each player shares his innermost thoughts on retracing a legendary journey, that all those years ago turned boys into men, and along the way saved our wonderful country from Japanese invasion.



Brett Kirk, Leo Barry, Andrew Schauble, Gerrard Bennett, Ryan O'Keefe and Rowan Warfe at the waterfall, location of the 3rd battalion militia



With some of the villagers at Nodori Village

The story of Kokoda

Leo Barry

"I can't help thinking back to the first night, when we started trekking.

It was 6.30pm and just starting to get dark, everyone was fresh but we had to carry 32kg backpacks and it didn't take long for the reality to hit home - this wasn't going to be easy.

We walked for three or four hours in pouring rain and I was continuously talking to Gerrard Bennett, who was behind me, even this early I was questioning why!

Physically, it hurt from soon after the start and mentally all I could do was think of how there was six days to go. I'd never done any hiking in my life and I wasn't looking forward to it if this was anything to go by.

Eventually, we got to our camp area at about 11.30pm and I have to admit it I had my doubts about whether I'd be able to go the distance.

Nobody was saying anything outwardly, it was all being bottled up inside but looking at the others you could see the anguish in their faces. Looking back I wish I'd had a mirror to see what I looked like myself.

That first night was the worst by a mile and from there it became much more bearable.

But still you couldn't help but reflect on what those young men who had fought back in WWII had gone through. At least we knew what the next day held in store for us - they never did.

As the days went on each of us had their own separate challenge, and each day seemed to bring with it added strength and resolve.

We learned to overcome adversity and you could see the anguish start to fade as we met villagers and worked together to reach our goal.

But that never meant that the frustration disappeared completely - we all had our moments but the experience of working together in such close quarters strengthened our bond.

There was tremendous camaraderie between the six of us and after that first night we invariably worked to keep each others spirits high.

I found it inspiring near the end when Charlie said that we were the most tight-knit group he had ever led on the Kokoda.

The whole experience has certainly enriched my life, learning about those who saved our country on the Kokoda and also meeting the villagers.

In our eyes they have nothing, but what they do have they appreciate and they live such a simple life without the stress we take for granted.

I also learned a lot about myself on the Kokoda.

I learned that when I'm up against adversity I can push past what I previously accepted as my limitations, I feel I'm stronger physically and mentally for the experience of not only having walked the Kokoda but knowing just what the Kokoda Trail really means.

It means never give up, as there is very little in life you can't conquer."

The Japanese attack on Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, in May 1942 was repulsed at the battle of the Coral Sea, a month later its navy was severely damaged at the Battle of Midway.

These events prompted another approach to Moresby and on 22 July, 2,000 Japanese were landed near Gona with the aim of crossing the Owen Stanley Range via the tortuous Kokoda Trail.

During the next week 80 Australians and Papuans fought delaying actions, culminating in a battle at Kokoda Village. The Japanese force rose to 10,000 whilst advancing along the Kokoda Trail.

They were constantly delayed by defensive action particularly at Isurava and Brigade Hill.

However, by mid-September the Australians (reduced from 3,000 to 300 men) were forced back to Imita Ridge, 42km from Moresby.

The Japanese were then ordered to withdraw as their 5,000 remaining men and supplies were totally exhausted, and their army at Guadalcanal (Solomon Islands) was on the defensive against the Americans.

On 23 September the Australians, now 2,600 strong, moved northwards to recover the trail, encountering major opposition only at Templeton's and Era Creek. Kokoda was entered unopposed on 2 November. The Japanese rearguard was destroyed near Gorari.

5,000 Japanese survived and were joined by 4,000 fresh troops around Gona and Buna. Australian and American forces captured these strongholds by January 1943, incurring heavy casualties on both sides.

The Papuan carriers played an important role in the defense of the Kokoda Trail, transporting Australian casualties and supplies. Their loyalty will be remembered forever.

Brett Kirk

Brett Kirk was one player who desperately wanted to trek the Kokoda. His grandfather, Wally Moras was just 18 when he fought there during WWII.

"After getting off the plane at Kokoda Plateau we were shown two memorials, they were both Japanese.

I asked Charlie Lynn where the Australian memorials were and he said there wasn't any. I couldn't believe it and was absolutely disgusted.

How could the Australian government not formally recognise the significance of the Kokoda? This was as close as a major Japanese assault came to our shores and they were turned back by all of these young heroes and as a nation we don't even acknowledge them.

Charlie explained to us that the Japanese had come up about 15 years ago and put up these memorials to their soldiers. For the life of me I can't understand why we haven't done the same.

During the course of the trek I kept thinking back to what the soldiers must have endured - they couldn't have known what was happening a lot of the time.

They were all kids, much younger than most of us at the Swans and here they were fighting to save our country.

When I was growing up I would go to the Anzac Day marches and watch my grandfather with the other Kokoda veterans but I never really knew the significance of the Kokoda.

Even reading about the Kokoda you don't get any idea about what it must have been like during the war.

But once you experience the terrain, and hear about the battles they fought, only then can you understand what these soldiers did for our country, why we are who we are today.

I kept wondering about the soldiers, my grandfather in particular, and how they survived in the face of such tremendous adversity.

Sure it was the toughest six days of my life but I learned a great deal from those six days - for one thing I learned that most of us have never pushed ourselves to anywhere near our full capacity.

I also learned what real bravery and courage is all about.

After we returned from the Kokoda I spent a lot of time with my grandfather over Christmas, for four or five days we talked about the Kokoda and I could visualise what he was talking about after having been there.

It only reinforced in my mind the disgust (of no Australian memorials) I had when I stepped off that plane and set my first foot on the Kokoda.

What the six of us players went through was nothing, what the soldiers went through was far beyond anything we could have ever imagined."

Rowan Warfe

"There are so many aspects of the Kokoda experience that I'll never forget.

Obviously at the forefront of those thoughts will be the courage of the Australian soldiers who fought there and the conditions which they had to endure.

But I'll also never forget the six days we spent together as a team, the good times and the bad, and the lessons I learned from it.

And I'll also never forget the kids we met along the way.

There are so many things we take for granted in the society in which we live, the simple things like a mirror for instance.

We took a video camera with us and I can still see the look on the faces of these four and five-year-olds watching themselves for the first time.

Imagine not knowing what you looked like, never having seen yourself before in a mirror - it was an enlightening experience to see these youngsters realising how they looked.

They were all so happy, even though they had none of the comforts we take for granted. We live in a society that is so materialistic but in the end it doesn't make us any happier - these kids were proof of that.

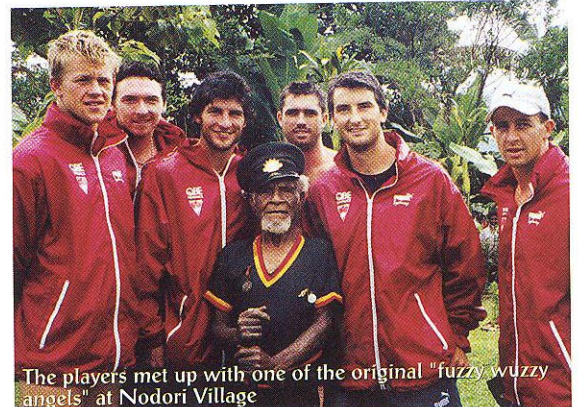
On the trek itself I'd have to say it was the hardest six days of my life with the second last night the worst for sure.

After a day of trekking through swamp I was so fatigued and kept slipping and falling over. I'd lost my walking stick and to top it off I got stung by a wasp - I was frustrated and hurting, and so tired.

But like everyone else I knew I just had to get through it and in the end I have no doubts I'm a better person for the whole ordeal.

I now know I'm better prepared for things that might confront me in life.

We were taken out of our comfort zone on the Kokoda, there was never going to be any worries about our fitness, but it was our mental toughness that was really tested and we all got through it and emerged the better for it."



The players met up with one of the original "fuzzy wuzzy angels" at Nodori Village

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it was the toughest six days of my life



Charlie Lynn (front centre) led the boys on their epic journey

The SPIRIT of Kokoda

In August 1942 a battalion of 450 young ANZAC's dug in around a remote jungle village high up in the Owen Stanley Ranges of New Guinea. They formed Australia's ragged last line of defence against a seemingly invincible Japanese war machine which had swept unchecked through Asia and the Pacific.

The village was called Isurava. The narrow jungle track winding through it was called Kokoda!

The Battalion was the 39th. The average age of the Diggers was 18 years old. They had been hastily trained and were ill-prepared for combat. They were heavily outnumbered and seriously outgunned. They had already been fighting the Japanese for six weeks in some of the most hostile jungle terrain on our planet. But they were all that stood between an invading army of 10,000 Japanese soldiers and their families back home in Australia.

The battle which was about to erupt has been likened to the ancient Greek battle of Thermopylae where 300 Spartans held a mountain pass against thousands of invading Persians nearly 2,500 years ago. Unlike the legendary Greek Spartans our Diggers remain largely unremembered and unhonoured.

When the fanatical Japanese army burst from the cover of the surrounding jungle all hell broke loose. The bravehearts of the 39th Militia Battalion held their ground but after three days and nights of savage hand-to-hand combat fewer than 200 gaunt figures were left standing.

These young warriors were on the verge of annihilation when the battle-hardened men of the 2/14th Australian Infantry Battalion emerged from the jungle to reinforce their position.

But it was not long before they too were in trouble.

At this point a motley group of about 30 wounded, sick and starving stragglers were being evacuated back along the Track when they heard of their plight. Slowly they turned around and hobbled back to battle to help their mates – just one of the many selfless acts of sacrifice that now typifies the spirit of Kokoda.

History records that we lost the battle of Isurava - but we never lost our fighting spirit!

Desperate battles continued along the Track until the Australians rallied on the last line of defence at Imita Ridge and began the offensive which drove the Japanese back into the sea at Buna and Gona. By this time the names of Butchers' Ridge, Brigade Hill, Iorabaiwa Ridge, Templeton's Crossing, Deniki and Kokoda had been emblazoned on the battle honours of proud Australian army units.

These battle honours symbolise the spirit of Kokoda – a spirit of mateship, courage, trust, respect, loyalty, stamina, endurance, selfless sacrifice and strength in adversity – enduring human qualities that inspire ordinary men to achieve extraordinary results against all the odds.

During six tough days in December six Sydney Swans footballers - Andrew Schauble, Rohan Warfe, Brett Kirk, Gerrard Bennett, Leo Barry and Ryan O'Keefe demonstrated that they are worthy inheritors of that spirit.

Andrew Schauble

"It's funny how you just accept our will to survive, but it's only when you understand the endeavour to which an individual will go that you really appreciate what 'the will to survive' really means.

The one thing that stands out most in my mind from trekking the Kokoda was Charlie telling us the story of the Japanese soldier who endured three days hiding from the Australians inside a tree.

He had dug himself in and stayed put while all this fighting was going on around him.

At stages during those three days he even had Australian soldiers leaning on the tree until the Japanese eventually pushed them back and he was able to come out.

There was also the story of the 30 Australian soldiers who were either shot or wounded and they were retreating for treatment, these men were carrying each other, crawling, doing anything they could just to keep alive and get back to their base camp.

Word got to them that their mates on the front line were in trouble so they turned and went back to help, all except three who were too badly injured.

When you hear stories like that it makes you realise the lengths to which human endeavour can take you.

Those stories and the trek itself reinforced to me that we all have the capacity to achieve great things if we push ourselves, when we talk about pushing to the limit I can now only question, what is the limit?

I question whether we know at all, whether we really know, what our full potential is, in my case I don't think I do by any means.

We think we find our limits but the reality is we really don't.

Taking into account what the soldiers on the Kokoda had to endure I don't think we were pushed to half of what we could have achieved on the Kokoda if the need really arose.

Talking to Charlie about group dynamics I now realise that you have to be more understanding in a team environment, you have to be prepared to appreciate the individuality of each person and work out how we can help each other for the best end result.

In any team, whether it's sport, business or war, there are obviously some with better skills than others but in the end it's the harmony and camaraderie between everyone that eventually reaps the greatest harvest."

what the "will to survive" really means

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Heavy undergrowth and river crossings were all part of a days trekking

Ryan O'Keefe

"Being the youngest of the six players I might have been a bit more naïve in taking on the Kokoda and it certainly hit me on the first night.

Knowing virtually nothing about the Kokoda my initial thoughts were that it would be a long walk but being as fit as we are I thought it wouldn't be anything too tough. I was to be given a rude awakening.

It turned out to be the experience of my life, but in saying that I'd definitely do it again.

Physically and mentally it was exhausting, probably tougher mentally because I could never have imagined how hard it was going to be getting myself up for day after day.

In the end I think that's one of the things I took away from Kokoda more than anything else - the enjoyment of having adapted to something completely foreign.

After the first two days I found I had settled into what we were trying to achieve and it became easier as the trek went on. But there were still days when I wondered how we would get through it but nobody wanted to let anyone else down and we all gained strength from that.

You end up with a totally different mindset as to how you approach things and in the end I'm certainly tougher mentally because of the Kokoda experience.

One of the things that was driven into us was the fact we all have a talent and we have to appreciate what we've got, we have to use that talent to the full.

As well as learning about myself and my team mates it was also such a great opportunity to learn about the Australian heroes of the Kokoda and to also see how the villager people live, their happiness with their lot.

To see the look on the faces of those who had never seen white people before is something I'll never forget about Kokoda, it was amazing."

Gerrard Bennett

"As we were trekking on the third evening Charlie told us we had a one hour mountain climb then a 3km flat walk to the next village.

After we had reach the top of the mountain we were greeted by an open paddock and were quite happy when we saw no trees or scrub.

Only thing was that while the walk was flat it turned out to be 2½ hours trudging knee-deep through a swamp.

Charlie kept saying there was only a half-hour to go but it was two hours later before we finished - I could have throttled him. I kept yelling at Charlie and I was so frustrated I sort of felt if I had died at that moment I don't think I would have cared.

I was so tired, we were wearing miners helmets with lights but when the batteries ran out I was too exhausted to stop and change them so I just walked the last hour in the dark - I have never been so fatigued in my life.

The first couple of days leading up to that were tough but that third night just took me to the edge. However, after I had collapsed at the end of that night I decided to attack the rest of the trek differently.

I realised there was no way out except forward, and under that circumstance I had better get used to it and not concern myself with how hard it might be as we all had to go through it together.

From there I just pushed on and in the end was quite enjoying it, the whole experience was fantastic, especially learning about the history of Kokoda and also meeting the villagers.

It was certainly an unbelievable experience arriving in a village at 10pm and then having all the kids watching everything we did, and to also hold some clinics with the villagers was very rewarding.

I have no doubts I've come away from Kokoda a different person in many ways.

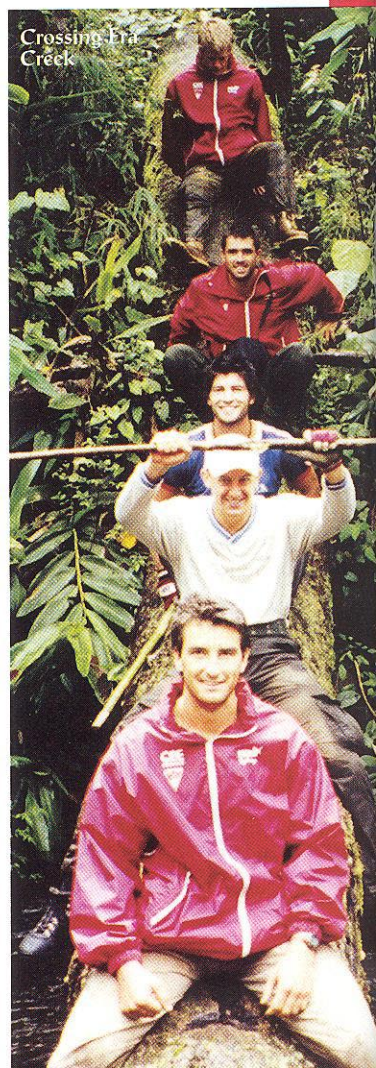
For one thing I now have a great appreciation of what the Australian soldiers on Kokoda did for all of us. Before heading up there I had little knowledge of Kokoda.

On a more personal note, I feel I've got a greater understanding of how to go about certain things.

For instance before Christmas I'd wind myself up the night before we were doing a 5km time trial - I mean really wind myself up worrying about how tough it would be and how I'd handle it.

Now, I look at something like that and say, 'alright, it's got to be done so just get out there and give it everything you've got'.

Certainly the bar has been raised as to what I can achieve after walking the Kokoda."



Crossing Era Creek