



Time for PNG to Take Back Kododa

The Hon Charlie Lynn OAM OL
Major (Rtd)

'In hindsight, Frontier Resources should have been allowed to proceed with the mining of the \$4 billion (K10 billion) gold and copper deposit from Mt Bini with appropriate environmental protection.

'The mine, adjacent to the southern section of the Trail, would have delivered an estimated \$100 million (K234 million) in community benefits over its projected 10-year life which would have expired in 2019.

'With proper management this would have funded a Military Heritage Master Plan and interpretive memorials at every site across the Kokoda Trail along with schools and health centres to meet the immediate and future needs of village communities.

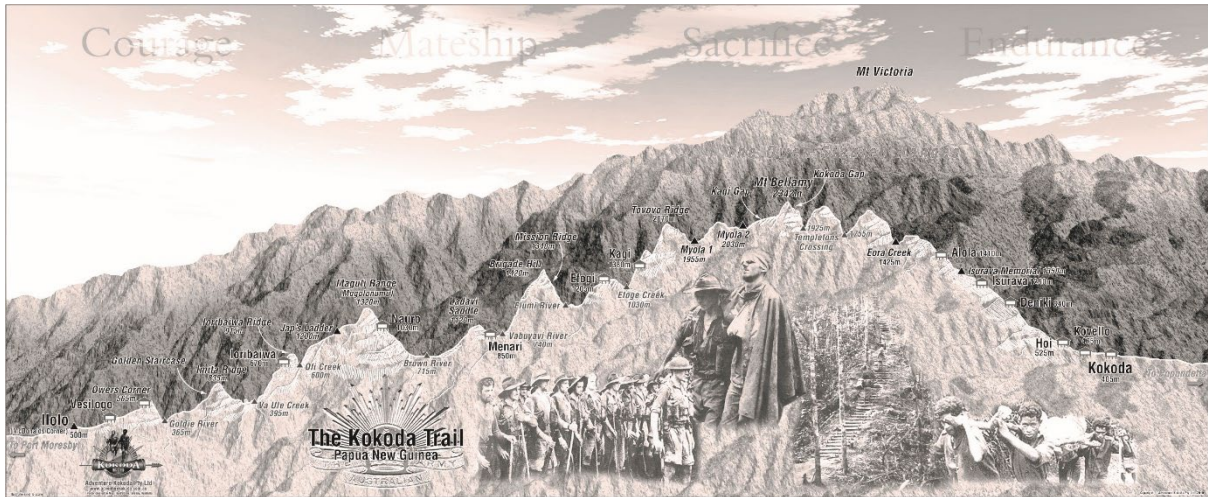
'The economic future of traditional landowner communities based on pilgrimage tourism would have been assured.

'Unfortunately the term 'Kokoda' has since been hijacked by Canberra officials to give relevance to a socio-environmental agenda that would otherwise be unremarkable.

'As a result their socio-environmental priorities have seen Kokoda tourism numbers plummet by 46 percent under their watch since 2009.'

Hon Charlie Lynn OAM OL
Major (Rtd)
101 Kokoda Treks: 1991-2023

30 March 2024



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Preamble

Subsistence villagers across the Kokoda Trail earned zero income from pilgrimage tourism until the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign in 1992.

Since then the Trail has emerged as PNG's most popular tourism destination with more than 65,000 Australians having trekked across it. The has generated an estimated K75 million in earnings for village communities.

Our anecdotal research with the 7,000+ Australians we have led indicates they were motivated by the military history of the Kokoda campaign and the physical challenge it presented.

They never expected to have a '*cultural awakening*' or an '*environmental levitation*' – they simply wanted to walk in the footsteps of our diggers, hear their stories, and experience some of the adversity they had to overcome to stop a fanatical enemy on our doorstep in 1942.

Their cultural awakening with our closest neighbour, former territory and wartime ally comes later.

After the war the men who fought in the campaign returned to their cities and towns to rebuild their lives. Few had any desire to return to the battlefields and revisit the trauma they experienced. For many it took an Anzac Day reunion to get them to even talk about it among their mates.

But their stories slowly seeped out as baby boomers lined their Anzac Day marches and later perched on tank-stands outside mechanics halls around the country to eavesdrop on their stories.

Kokoda Tourism

Interest in Kokoda tourism lay dormant for 50 years before I led my first group across it in 1942 – prior to this small groups of hardy adventures periodically ventured across it but there were no economic benefits or opportunities for villagers, and no interest from Canberra.

The publicity generated from our first group to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign led to an increase in public interest and to more inquiries.

After leading more groups and learning more about the Trail and its people I submitted a proposal for a [Master Plan to develop the Kokoda Trail as a National Memorial Park](#) in good faith in 1994 – it was ignored.

In 1996 I led a group of celebrities across the Trail for a Channel 9 Anzac Day special – the group included Angry Anderson, Daryl Braithwaite, Dermot Brereton, Collette Mann and Grant Kenney.

The screening of the program on '[A Current Affair](#)' resulted in the highest ratings ever achieved by the show. It reinforced my view that Australians want to know more about our wartime history and led to an increase in awareness of the pilgrimage.

More trekkers inevitably led to a desire from subsistence villagers to share in the economic benefits from foreign trekkers crossing their traditional land. Their frustrations were ignored by government and eventually led to local disputes and trek closures.

PNG Management: 1992-2008

We believed their concerns were valid as the result of the relationship we established with them over the previous 12 years and proposed a management body be established to cope with the emerging interest in Kokoda tourism.

Our proposal was accepted by the PNG Minister for Provincial and Local Level Government Affairs, Sir Peter Barter, who established a Kokoda Track (Special Purpose) Authority (KTA). However he advised it would have to be self-funded as the PNG economy was not in good shape at the time.

Our company, Adventure Kokoda, therefore provided the initial funding for the new KTA with an advance of \$10,000 to allow it to sustain its office until trek fees could be collected.

Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) officials were difficult to engage and had no interest in assisting PNG to develop it as a National Memorial Park as we had proposed, and no interest in assisting them to manage it.

However, to their credit they did fund the construction of a significant memorial on the Isurava battlesite which we had rediscovered six years earlier 1996. The memorial was officially opened by Prime Ministers' John Howard and Sir Michael Somare on the 60th anniversary of the battle in 2002.

Unfortunately DVA saw it is the end of their commitment to the Kokoda Trail while we hoped it would be the beginning as the number of trekkers increased by 423% from 1074 in 2003 to 5621 in 2008.

Mt Bini Goldmine

The discovery of an \$4 billion (K10 billion) gold and copper deposit on Mt Bini adjacent to the Kokoda Trail in 2006 finally triggered Canberra to take an interest in it.

Frontier Resources claimed the economic benefits from the mine would provide more in taxes and royalties to the Papua New Guinea government than all Australian aid and provided the example of the expected royalties and taxes from Ok Tedi in 2007/08 (Media Release, 19 November 2007).

Newspaper reports estimated the return for landowners and the Kokoda Track Authority over the estimated 10-year production of the mine would be in the vicinity of \$100 million (K234 million) with half quarantined for the preservation of the Trail and half for education for communities across the Trail.

Frontier Resources approval for the mine was successfully challenged on a technicality by both governments. Nauro landowners reportedly received a generous compensation package from the PNG Government and have since mostly abandoned their village and moved to Port Moresby.

Canberra's intervention was therefore seen to have 'saved' the Kokoda Trail and they set about assisting PNG to obtain a World Heritage listing.

The Canberra Takeover - 2009

Canberra then committed \$16 million (K38 million) to assist PNG to secure a world heritage listing via a 'Joint Understanding between PNG and Australia on the Kokoda Track and

Owen Stanley Ranges' signed in 2008. A major justification for the joint agreement was the need to protect the upper reaches of the Brown River as a potential water source for Port Moresby.

A year later the PNG government announced plans for a Chinese funded \$260 million (K640 million) 54 MW **Edevu Hydro Power Project** on the Brown River which effectively negated the need for a World Heritage listing to protect of the water catchment in the swampland area between Nauro and Menari villages on the Trail.

However the announcement did not deter Canberra from dispatching bureaucrats and consultant environmentalists, anthropologists, archaeologists, academics, and social engineers intent on assisting PNG to establish a case for a World Heritage listing for the Owen Stanley Ranges which included the gazetted boundaries of the Kokoda Trail.

The invasion of new arrivals was reminiscent of Keith Wiley's observations in 'Assignment New Guinea' 53 years earlier:

'In recent years the academics have discovered New Guinea. Grave, plump, portentous, they swarm north in their hundreds each winter, generally finishing somewhere near Goroka in the Eastern Highlands where at times they become so numerous that every bush and stone seems to conceal a lurking bureaucrat or anthropologist. After a few weeks or a few months they return home to prepare brisk solutions for all the problems which beset the land. Too often they see New Guinea coldly as an exercise in nation-building to be carried out as quickly as possible, with one eye on the taxpayer at home and the other on some ranting demagogue in the United Nations.

'At times the maligned colonialists, who walked over the country and fought for it, seem to come nearer the heart of the matter. Stripped of slogans and self-interest, New Guinea emerges not as a 'problem'; to be 'solved', or assessed, but simply as a land, wild and beautiful, worthy to be loved for its own sake; with a people, backward, kindly, and in need of helpⁱ.

The new arrivals from Canberra's Department of Environment, Water, Heritage, and the Arts (DEWHA) were just as unfamiliar with PNG and the *Melanesian Way* as their predecessors were in 1965.

Rather than join a legitimate Kokoda tour company to experience the pilgrimage with fellow Australian taxpayers, to understand its historic significance and get a feel for the needs and expectations of local villagers they invariably opted to trek in their own small groups (at Australian taxpayers' expense) with a local guide who knew nothing about military strategy, jungle warfare tactics, or the battles across the Trail.

Some returned to Canberra as 'experts' while others were assigned to a 'Kokoda Development Program' within the Australian High Commission to work on AusAID projects unrelated to pilgrimage tourism.

Others were later embedded within the PNG Conservation Environment Protection Authority (CEPA) in their quest to seek a World Heritage listing to prevent any further mining or logging incursions into the area. The fact that this would restrict economic opportunities for subsistence villagers was not an issue to the new wave of environmental zealots.

Both AusAID funded groups operated in isolation to each other and in a parallel universe to the reality of the '*law of the jungle*' that prevailed across the Trail due to the lack of any form of management systems or control.

Neither Canberra officials nor the new DEWHA arrivals displayed any awareness of the findings of an earlier 2006 **'Rapid Assessment and Prioritisation of Protected Area Management'** (RAPPAM) report for PNG. The comprehensive report had been compiled by the Department of Environment and Conservation, the PNG Forestry Authority, the Research and Conservation Foundation, the Nature Conservancy, and the Village Development Trust which concluded:

'Many of the areas with high socio-economic importance are facing a relatively low degree of threat (Kokoda, Wiad, Pirung).

'Areas like Lihir, Tonda, and Bagiai are exceptions to this rule and hence require more efforts to protect them from the variety of threats they are currently facing.'

Another group of DEWHA officials were assigned to the offices of the PNG KTA and assumed responsibility for the management of the Kokoda Trail. None had any previous experience in commercial business management, pilgrimage tourism, or the reality of the *'Melanesian Way'*. None had trekked across the Trail, so they had no understanding of its environment, its historic sites, or the adequacy of campsite facilities.

They also failed to conduct any village-based workshops to seek to understand local community needs and expectations – a fundamental necessity in *'seeking to understand before being understood'* in Melanesian culture.

Their agenda was first exposed in their subtle redefinition of the 'Kokoda Trail' as a 'Kokoda Corridor' which included Sirinumu Dam in the south of Central Province to the northern beachheads of Oro Province, and a large portion of the Owen Stanley Ranges as part of a wider environmental agenda.

Rather than define their role as an *'Owen Stanley Ranges Initiative'* they chose the term 'Kokoda' due to its emotive resonance with Australian taxpayers – it also firewalled them from any criticism of their wider socio-environment agenda.

The extended focus provided an alibi for Canberra to disregard the need for management systems to be introduced for the emerging Kokoda tourism industry.

As a result no management systems have ever been introduced; no investment has been directed toward the identification, protection and interpretation of military heritage sites to enhance the value of the pilgrimage for trekkers; no investment has been directed towards ensuring campsites are adequate to meet the needs of trekkers; no initiatives have been introduced to assist subsistence village communities to earn additional income by providing goods and services to meet the needs of trekkers; and there is no evidence of any plan to interpret the environment with discreet signage.

The results of their failure to properly manage Kokoda tourism since they took control in 2009 are a matter of record.

Kokoda trekker numbers have fallen by 46 percent which has resulted in a cumulative loss of some \$19 million (K45 million) in foregone wages, campsite fees, and local purchases for the subsistence village communities across the Trail.

The failure can be attributed to Canberra's emphasis on managing the Trail as an environmental

bureaucracy to support a World Heritage listing instead of supporting a commercial tourism enterprise for the economic benefit of subsistence village communities across it.

Fallacy of World Heritage

In 2014 Canberra amalgamated the AusAID Kokoda Development Program with the DFAT Kokoda Initiative within the PNG Conservation Environment Protection Authority (CEPA).

The amalgamation coincided with an expert report by Dr Peter Hitchcock, Dr Jennifer Gabriel, and Dr Matthew Leavesley which found the Kokoda Trail did not meet the criteria for a World Heritage listing. The report effectively exposed the [fallacy of their World Heritage project](#).

DFAT environment officials then scrambled to refocus their strategy towards the next level down by seeking 'protected area (PA)' status' for an 'Interim Protection Zone (IPZ)' and sought to maintain their control over it via a clandestine attempt to establish a new environmental '[Kokoda Track Management Authority](#)' within CEPA.

Once again, Canberra officials failed to consult with the two key stakeholders in the drafting process, i.e., Kokoda tour operators who generate the income for Kokoda tourism, and subsistence villagers who own the land sacred to our shared military heritage.

They also continued to ignore the findings of the 2006 'Rapid Assessment and Prioritisation of Protected Area Management' report which should have seen them divert their environmental resources to areas that have already been identified as high-risk threats further afield in PNG.

Dubious Engagement of Australia's Military Heritage Advisor for PNG

Our repeated calls for a Military Heritage Master Plan for the Kokoda Trail had fallen on deaf ears for many years however the exposure of the World Heritage fallacy finally led to a 'Yes Minister' strategy from Canberra.

Abt Associates, a Canberra-funded global development consulting firm, posted the following information in an advertisement for a Military Heritage Advisor at the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery (PNG-NMAG):

'The PNG National Museum and Art Gallery (the Museum) is a core member of the Kokoda Initiative, being legislatively responsible for the preservation of all WWII war remains and artefacts. With most trekkers on the Kokoda Track being attracted by the military history of the Kokoda Campaign and its associated heritage, the preservation of the remaining evidence of the military presence on the Track is essential. The PNG Kokoda Initiative Master Plan envisages the development of a Kokoda Track Management Plan which will be made up of several elements including the strategic management of the military heritage on the Trackⁱⁱ.

'This plan will itself make up a critical element of the Environmentally Sustainable Development Master Plan being developed by CEPA for effective management of all values in the Brown River/Owen Stanley Range/Kokoda catchmentⁱⁱⁱ'

The PNG NMAG is responsible to the Minister for Tourism, Arts and Culture. It is a cultural museum which has no expertise in military heritage and which has been subject to [allegations of corruption](#) in recent years. The CEO, Dr Andrew Moutu, is an anthropologist.

According to Mr Tom Battams, Third Secretary (Kokoda) at the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby:

'The position was advertised on the Abt Associates (Australia) website and LinkedIn page from Abt Associates which is the Australian Government's lead contractor engaged in the delivery of KI. The advertisement was shared proactively with universities, the Army Museum of WA^{iv}, Darwin Military Museum^v, Army Museum of NSW^{vi}, Army Museum of South Australia^{vii}, and through local and international networks by NMAG, KTA, CEPA and Kokoda Initiative staff.'

Mr Battams also advised:

'The Australian Government is strongly encouraging NMAG to quickly establish an advisory body of military heritage experts and tour operators to ensure the views and interests of operators are reflected in the final Military Heritage Strategy. We urge trekking operators to contribute constructively to this body to give it every chance to succeed.'

This statement regarding the need to act 'quickly' was misleading.

The Abt document was dated 15 July 2016, however the advertisement for the position was inexplicably delayed until the peak of the Christmas holiday season between 19 December 2016 and 8 January 2017.

The military museums mentioned were closed during this period and none of the Kokoda trek operators listed on the [KTA website](#) were advised of the position.

The tender process could best be described as dodgy as it was not distributed to the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), the Australian War Memorial (AWM), or to accredited Australian military historians with expert knowledge of the Kokoda campaign.

The DFAT Strategic Advisor in CEPA, Mr Mark Nizette MBE, was well aware of the credentials of a military historian and Kokoda trek leader, Lieutenant-Colonel Rowan Tracey, who would have applied for the position if he had been aware of it. Colonel Tracey, a recipient of the Sword of Honour from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, served with the PNGDF and is fluent in *Tok Pisin*. He first trekked across the Trail 40 years ago and many times since. He is the author of the official history of the 2nd Australian Infantry Division and was invited to address an international conference on the Kokoda campaign at the Australian War Memorial. He is Australia's foremost historical expert on the Kokoda campaign. He was not contacted by Mark Nizette.

Nizette was also aware of Captain Reg Yates, author of the *Australian Army Adventure Guide for PNG*, who has visited and reported on every major campaign area throughout Papua New Guinea over a period of 40 years. He was not contacted either.

The successful candidate was an American anthropologist, Dr Andrew Connelly, whose thesis for his master's degree in Anthropology was '*Counting Coconuts: Patrol Reports from the Trobriand Islands. Part 1: 1907-1934*'. His thesis for his doctorate was '*Ambivalent Empire" Indigenous and Colonial Historicities in the Trobriand Islands, 1832-1941*'.

Dr Connelly, who does not have any qualifications relating to military heritage, is an associate of Mark Nizette who, according to his LinkedIn profile, is a candidate for a doctorate in anthropology.

The statement by Mr Battams is indicative of a carefully crafted strategy within the 'Port Moresby DFAT clique' to bypass the Australian War Memorial, the official custodian of Australia's military heritage, and DVA.

The recruiting process would certainly not have escaped the attention of relevant watchdog agencies if it had occurred in Australia!

If the 'Kokoda Initiative' was relevant to the protection, development, and interpretation of battlesites across traditional land between Sogeri and Kokoda, the following two criteria would be applied to the expenditure of any taxpayer funds:

1. Will the investment add value to the pilgrimage across it for Australian trekkers?
2. Will it provide an opportunity for traditional landowner communities to earn additional income from it?

There are no known aid-funded projects that meet this criteria since Canberra took control of Kokoda tourism in 2009.

Kokoda Track Military Heritage Management Plan Fail

The PNG 'Kokoda Track Military Heritage Management Plan' was co-authored by Dr. Connolly; Mark Nizette; and Mr Greg Bablis, Principal Curator for Modern History at the museum. None have any qualification in military heritage or pilgrimage tourism.

This is reflected in their description of the Kokoda campaign as an 'event'.

Mark Nizette is regarded as the primary influencer of all things to do with the Canberra-funded Kokoda Initiative due to his long-term engagement as their DFAT Strategic Advisor; his fluency in *Tok Pisin*; his position as Secretary of the influential PNG Ministerial Kokoda Initiative Committee within CEPA; his authority within the KTA office where he has relocated himself after been banned from it by the former KTA CEO, Mr. James Enage for four years; and his co-authorship of the NMAG Kokoda Track Military Heritage Management Plan.

The Vision developed by the co-authors is meaningless:

'That the military heritage of the Kokoda Track remains safe, authentic and accessible for residents and visitors for generations to come.'

A more appropriate vision statement would reflect the potential of the Kokoda Trail to be a world-class pilgrimage tourism destination for the economic benefit of traditional landowner communities across it.

The document is more akin to a self-serving job description in support of their own socio-environmental agenda through a 'Kokoda' lens for relevance. It is a paltry 16 pages (with liberal use of graphics to achieve this), is broad in scope, simplistic in detail, and littered with bureaucratic speak of non-measurable platitudes such as '*acknowledging*', '*sharing*', '*recognising*', '*engaging*', '*working with*' etc. It has little relevance to the reality of managing Kokoda tourism as evident by the following extracts:

- The Plan will also recognise the prominent roles of Japan and the USA in PNG's war history, as well as the place of other nations, including the UK, India, Fiji, China, Korea, Taiwan, etc.
- The NMAG recognises the need for gender awareness in interpretive design and content, and the value of gendered renditions of oral history and other historical material.

- The Plan acknowledges that gendered relations and issues of social inclusion influence the implementation of community projects. The NMAG recognises the importance of taking gender and social inclusion into account at all phases of planning, consultation and implementation, and will do so explicitly in each element of the Plan.
- The NMAG finds that the terms ‘Kokoda Track’ and ‘Kokoda Trail’ are both historically valid appellations for the system of footpaths between Owers Corner and Kokoda. For consistency, the NMAG will use ‘Kokoda Track’ throughout this and related documents. However, this does not indicate a judgment upon historical validity, and the NMAG neither proscribes nor discourages the use of ‘Kokoda Trail’ by others.

Japan certainly played a prominent role in the Kokoda campaign – they started it!

The United States also had a prominent role as our major ally. However the UK, India, Fiji, China, Korea, and Taiwan were not involved. When this was pointed out to Dr. Connolly he went off into an academic diatribe about their nebulous connections to the War in the Pacific.

The need for ‘gender awareness’ in interpretive design and content’ should not be too difficult to implement – all soldiers involved in the Kokoda campaign were men!

The plan’s recognition of ‘gender and social inclusion’ is more reflective of their own woke ideals than any form of reality across the Trail today where village communities live according to the spiritual dictates of the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

The term ‘Kokoda Trail’ is the official term gazetted by the PNG Government and the official name of the Battle Honour awarded to their Papuan Infantry Battalion. Canberra’s insistence on using their politically correct term ‘Kokoda Track’ is a patronising insult to PNGs sovereign right to name their own geographic features. One can only imagine the outcry if Papua New Guineans insisted in referring to ‘Uluru’ as ‘Ayers Rock’!

The plan comprises over-arching statements around site and artefact preservation but no detail on what will be done at which locations regarding preservation and interpretation, which should be the essence of a legitimate master plan.

The ‘actions and tasks’ section also lacks any specifics and contains no timeframes for any works to be completed, which should also be a key element of any such plan.

It provides no detail on key sites, including but not limited to, Isurava, Brigade Hill, Ioribaiwa, Eora Creek, Templeton’s Crossing, Imita Ridge, Deniki, Myola etc; what is required at each location; and when it will be done. In fact, most of these locations do not rate a mention.

Since then Dr. Connolly who, according to his signature block now has a PhD in Pacific History, has gone off on a tangent far from the boundaries of the Kokoda campaign.

He has advised that:

‘all major decisions by the NMAG, including policy decisions regarding the NMAG’s work as a PNG member institution of the Kokoda Initiative are undertaken by NMAG leadership. NMAG staff and leadership make their own decisions, often without any outside input, which is of course a perfectly natural and desirable state of affairs.’

Dr Connolly inadvertently belled the cat with his reference to their ‘NMAG leadership’ being the final arbiters on their own aid-funded agenda without any form of accountability – it is more akin to an open aid-funded chequebook to pursue their own socio-environmental agenda.

Any credible Military Heritage Master Plan for the Kokoda Trail would have input from the Australian War Memorial, Australian military historians, and experienced Kokoda tour leaders. It would also reflect that the Kokoda campaign was not an ‘event’ as stated in the plan – it was actually a series of battles fought across the Kokoda Trail between July and November 1942.

DFAT Kokoda Initiative Follies

Under Mark Nizette’s watch, and since Dr Connolly’s appointment in early 2018, the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative has carefully avoided investing in the identification, preservation and interpretation of any significant military heritage sites across the Kokoda Trail.

Kokoda Track Museums

There is no evidence of any form of ‘cost-benefit analysis’, or consultation with tour operators before taxpayer funds were committed to their ‘[Kokoda Track Museums and Trade Centre](#)’ projects which now sit as white elephants in villages as trekkers have little interest in them and local villagers have never used them.

Lost Battlefield of Etoa

Their ‘[Lost battlefield of Etoa](#)’ was the result of a scam – there is no record of an ‘Etoa battle’ during the Kokoda campaign. The consultant archaeologist engaged for the project admitted to identifying it as a ‘lost battlefield’ because it was a ‘catchy term’. He has never explained the inconvenient circumstances surrounding their ‘discovery’ of a human skull found wrapped in a plastic bag beneath a helmet which his team unearthed. According to local villagers it had been relocated from a hut in nearby Alola, along with other rusted weaponry, but the landowner apparently forgot to remove the skull from the plastic bag!

Blamey’s Gardens

The engagement of a consultant archaeologist to investigate ‘[Blamey’s Gardens](#)’ at Hombrum Bluff was a waste of Australian taxpayer funds as it is far removed from the Kokoda Trail; has no tourism potential; and no relevance to Kokoda tourism.

Isurava Primary School

A primary school built in Isurava village with a capacity for up to 50 students and three new toilets has since been closed due to the lack of a teacher and primary aged students. **If the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative had conducted a cost-benefit analysis for the project they would have learned the population of the small village has been declining since the Isurava memorial, about a one-hour walk further up the Trail, was built in 2002. This resulted in many of them relocating to the original village site at the memorial.**

The population of the village is now estimated to be 50.

In 2019 the school had a total of 13 kindergarten students aged 3 – 6 years and the best ratio of toilets per student across the entire Kokoda Trail with one modern toilet per 4 elementary students – a couple of them needed help to get up onto the seat!

A delegation of 8 officials, led by Mark Nizette, was reported to have chartered a helicopter to fly in for the official opening at Australian taxpayers’ expense, to justify an impressive media release for Canberra.

Agulogo Log Bridge

Another delegation of 8 officials, led by Mark Nizette, chartered a helicopter to officially open a 'bridge' comprising a couple of logs trussed together across Agulogo Creek in the Nauro swamp area.

The bridge was obviously built without any form of cost-benefit analysis or consultation with tour operators. Trekkers crossed this creek without incident for 30 years.

If the cost of the helicopter had been allocated to the owners of the nearby Agulogo campsite it would have been sufficient for them to maintain a bridge across if for the next 20 years – however it would not have featured as well in the glossy media release for the opening of the 'project'.

The Kokoda Galleries

The recent construction of 'Kokoda Galleries' at the National Museum and Art Gallery was the latest ploy of Canberra funded 'Kokoda Initiative' operatives to avoid investing in the military heritage of the gazetted Kokoda Trail.

The National Museum has a history of serial corruption and neglect as reported [on this link](#).

The organisation had no record of any previous interest in the Kokoda Trail until the opportunity for a DFAT funded position (National Military Heritage Advisor) presented itself along with the potential for an aid-funded income stream.

The only visitation figures available [on this link](#) advise that there are 1400 visitors a month to the museum. Anecdotal evidence suggests these figures are inflated however, even if they are true, this amounts to an average of just 45 visitors a day!

These visitation figures – even at their inflated rate – do not justify any investment in a 'Military Heritage Annex' at the museum. Research would indicate that visitors to the site are motivated by the diverse historical and cultural intrigue of the '*land of a thousand cultures*'.

Of more concern is the fact that most of the estimated 3500 Australians who trek across the Kokoda Trail each year will not get to visit the centre because their travel-trek itineraries simply do not allow for it.

Those who do squeeze a visit into their itineraries will spend their restricted time in the existing cultural museum and art gallery which is now a first-class facility due to the recent \$25 million refurbishment funded by the former Abbott Government in 2014.

The development of a proposed Interpretive Walkway at Bomana War Cemetery as part of a \$10 million (K25,000) budget allocation by Canberra in the lead-up to the 80th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign in 2022 was foiled by operatives within the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative.

The aim of the project was to tell the story of the campaign from Port Moresby, across the Kokoda Trail onto the Northern Beachheads at Buna and Gona.

It was designed to ensure the maximum benefit for the maximum number of visitors to our largest war cemetery in the Pacific.

However it seems that under the cover of COVID the funds were re-directed to the 'Kokoda Galleries' at the National Museum under the auspices of Dr Connolly and Mark Nizette, co-authors of the seriously flawed 'NMAG Military Heritage Management Plan'

The Chairman and Director of the project, Brigadier Paul Nothard, Director of Australian War Graves in the Department of Veterans Affairs and Military Heritage Architect, [Michael Pender of HPA Projects](#), both resigned from the Project!

The Deputy Chairman of the Tourism Promotion Authority, Andrew Abel ML CSM, and the two most experienced Kokoda military historians and trekkers, Lieutenant Colonel Rowan Tracey and Major Chad Sherrin MM who had been engaged by Michael Pender, were then effectively sidelined from the project

It seems Dr Connolly and Mark Nizette engaged with the following Kokoda tour operators who have reinvented themselves as 'Kokoda experts':

- [David Howell – Kokoda Historical](#); and
- [Mick O'Malley – Australian Kokoda Tours](#)

Neither Howell nor O'Malley has served in the regular army or had any previous interest in veterans until they each saw an opportunity to cash in on Kokoda tourism. Both operate illegally in PNG and have been able to dodge their taxation liabilities due to the lack of compliance enforcement by PNG authorities. They are both close to Mark Nizette who uses them as his '*useful idiots*' to defend themselves against any external criticism and to support their aid-funded 'thought bubbles' across Kokoda.

Kokoda tour operators who pioneered pilgrimage tourism and specialize in the military history of the Kokoda campaign were not invited to the official opening of the 'Kokoda Galleries'.

International Kokoda Forum Junkets

The latest Kokoda Track Authority (KTA) [International Kokoda Tour Operators Forum](#) in a 5-Star Brisbane Hotel in November 2023 demonstrated their complete disregard for accountability and a disturbing detachment from reality.

The forum saw 10 Australian and PNG officials fly from Port Moresby to brief just 5 Australian Kokoda tour operators.

According to their agenda the forum could easily have been conducted as a zoom meeting.

The most interesting revelation was that the KTA now spends 100% of the income it receives from trek permit fees administering itself – nothing reaches village communities! We do not know the extent of their incompetence as they have never published an annual financial report.

The past failures of the KTA, which is surely the most incompetent Special Purpose Authority in PNG, have been documented on these links:

- [The Kokoda Trail: Chronology of Mismanagement: 2009-2019](#)
- [KTA Strategic Plan 2012-2015 – Fail!](#)

Australia-PNG Kokoda Initiative Partnership

The [Kokoda Initiative Partnership \(KIP\) Annual Review](#) within the DFAT 2019 'Report Papua New Guinea–Australia Governance Partnership' is a betrayal of our Kokoda legacy.

‘Kokoda Tourism’, which provides the economic lifeblood for village communities and offers hope for a sustainable economic future, does not rate in the DFAT-Kokoda Initiative review which prioritises their concerns relating to World Heritage, Interim Protection Zones (IPZs), Protected Areas (PAs), Gender Based Violence (GBV), and Gender, Equity, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI).

Is clear that DFAT funded officials and consultants in these areas have no idea of military heritage and the potential for the Kokoda Trail to be a world-class pilgrimage destination for the economic benefit of subsistence landowner communities.

Joint Agreement for a Military Heritage Partnership between Australia and PNG

If Canberra can develop a ‘Joint Agreement for the preservation of the Kokoda Track and Owen Stanley Ranges’ as it did in 2008 surely it can develop a similar agreement to commemorate our shared wartime heritage as proposed on this link: [Proposed Joint Understanding for Commemoration of the shared wartime heritage between Australia and Papua New Guinea](#).

Conclusion

In hindsight the mining company, Frontier Resources, should have been allowed to proceed with the mining of the \$8 billion (K20 billion) gold and copper deposit from Mt Kodu with appropriate environmental protection.

The mine would have delivered an estimated \$100 million (K234 million) over its projected 10-year life which would have expired in 2019. With proper management this would have funded a Military Heritage Master Plan and interpretive memorials at every site across the Trail along with schools and health centres to meet the immediate needs of village communities. The economic future of traditional landowner communities based on pilgrimage tourism would have been assured.

Unfortunately the term ‘Kokoda’ has been effectively hijacked by Canberra environment officials to give relevance to a socio-environmental agenda that would otherwise be unremarkable.

As a result their socio-environmental priorities have seen Kokoda tourism numbers plummet by 46 percent under their watch since 2009.

Poor management has resulted in the desecration of military heritage sites; a degradation of the environment in vulnerable areas; the denial of a tourism based economic future for the custodians of the land sacred to our shared military heritage; and a contemptuous disregard for the needs of taxpayers who invest in the pilgrimage.

A forensic audit of the KTA from the time Canberra assumed responsibility for it would reveal a disturbing depth of incompetence and corruption which now pervades every aspect of the organization.

The solution is for PNG to reclaim ownership of the Kokoda Trail from Canberra to work towards a vision of realizing its potential to be a world-class pilgrimage tourism destination for the economic benefit of traditional landowner communities.

Further information on the emergence of the Kokoda Trail as PNG’s most popular tourism destination can be found on this link: [The Rise, Fall and Future of Kokoda Tourism: 1991-2023](#).

Hon Charlie Lynn OAM OL
Major (Rtd)
30 March 2024

ⁱ Assignment New Guinea. Keith Wiley. Jacaranda Press.1965 P. i

ⁱⁱ http://abtjta.turborecruit.com.au/position_description/497/IFA%20-%20N MAG%20Military%20Heritage%20Adviser.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ [The Army Museum of WA](#) is a regional museum of the Australian Army History Unit network of museums throughout Australia managed by Army reservists and volunteers.

^{iv} The [Darwin Military Museum](#) provides a learning and commemorative war experience about the NT, also other parts of Australia's, rich military history in a sensitive and respectful manner.

^v [The Army Museum of New South Wales](#) . . . features many army uniforms from the earliest Colonial times through the Boer War, WWI and WWII; medals awarded including Victoria Crosses, Military Crosses, Distinguished Service Orders, Campaign Medals, Royal honours; and various historical.

^{vi} [The Army Museum of South Australia](#) began in 1992 when a need to collect and preserve our military history was recognised. Volunteers, mainly ex-defence force members, operate the Museum with the assistance of a Defence Force Cadre staff. Volunteers attend the Museum on Mondays and Wednesdays to conduct repairs, restoration and renovations to the various exhibits and equipment on display for public viewing.