

CHAPTER 3

The Canberra Times: A Hard Slog to Kokoda Marion Frith - 15 November 1992

The publicity surrounding former Prime Minister's Keating's visit to Kokoda for the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign, and the response to The Bulletin with Newsweek article 'A Walk on the Wild Side' by Helen Pitt led to inquiries for further treks.

I therefore invited a team of journalists from all the major newspapers to join me for a later trek to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the raising of the Australian flag on the Kokoda plateau after the Australians had recaptured Kokoda on 3 November 1942.

We were fortunate to be joined by a veteran of the Kokoda campaign, Corporal Les Cook of the 2/14th Battalion.

Canberra Times journalist, Marion Frith, captured the essence of the trek in her article: 'A Hard Slog to Kokoda' on November 15, 1992

'WE ARE indeed a strange collection of life's assorted gathered here so far from home,' wrote Canberra Times journalist, Marion Frith.

'Checking our packs, checking out each other. Among us are the media's most unfit, a professional fisherman, a surgeon-cum-ardent bushwalker, a marathon runner and a 70-year-old war veteran. We are on a pilgrimage for which, it turns out, we are largely unprepared.

'Our reasons for being there are many: some of us have been lured by the historical significance on this the 50th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign, others by the challenge of a "walk" (ha!) regarded as one of the most difficult in the world, and I and one other are retracing the awful steps taken by our fathers before we were born. Les Cook, of Garran, a veteran of the bitter battle, is there because, he says, he could not pass up the chance to come back and see it one more time.

'We have been herded together by an extraordinary man, Charlie Lynn, a retired Army major, who runs a company called Kokoda Epic. He is a passionate blend of adventurer and zealous patriot with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Papua-New Guinea campaigns and an unswerving commitment to enshrining Kokoda and all it represents in the minds and hearts of ignorant Australians. . .

'Between Charlie and Les the horrendous jungle track and the war which raged so viciously across it come to life. Charlie's moving accounts are coloured with Les's lively recollections. "This is where the Australians were butchered in their pits," Charlie will say. "My mate lost his last tin of rations down that hill," Les says. And together they guide us for a week through a moment in history that shaped a generation and cost it its innocence. .

'The pack of us that has fallen to the back of the group are slow and suffering. We stop constantly, cramping and aching. When will it end? By late afternoon it is raining steadily and we have not even made the ascent: there is a long way to go. Night begins to fall, as do my tears.

'Charlie steadies me with a cuddly and some food. "Come on mate," he says. "You can do it." But I don't want to do it and I don't want to be there. I want to go home.

Still we creep on. We are blanketed in darkness and lonely torches compete with armies of fireflies beneath a thick jungle canopy that censors any hope of starlight.

'The "up" eventually becomes an equally horrendous down and we put nervous muddy boot after nervous boot, conscious that every step has the potential for injury. Where does

our energy – pathetic and all but spent – continue to come from? How is that we are able to move at all?

‘Still, the camaraderie that descends upon this miserable caravan of lost souls is warm and enveloping. Those with torches light the way for those without, those temporarily firm on their feet support those who continually fall, those still able to muster a meagre dose of fleeting good cheer share it round in exchange for a last morsel of chocolate.

‘Finally, almost 16 hours after we set off that morning, we reach the village that is camp for the night. Charlie shepherds us in, he is tense and concerned. He had not reckoned on us being this bad. I collapse beside the fire, sobbing and shaking. My body is in spasm and I hear the nurse in the group mutter something about shock.

‘Suddenly tender hands that just 24 hours ago belonged to strangers are upon me, pulling off wet clothes, finding dry ones, holding hot tea to my lips and pressing a bowl of warm mush into my hands. Someone has laid out my sleeping mat, someone else is quietening the fast swelling number of hysterical pledges to pull out. As a group we are close to being out of control. We have lost it. . .

‘INCREDIBLY I am not broken – just broken in – and I wake to find that the despair of the night before has evaporated into the mist hanging over the valley. A group of solemn-faced children have put themselves on sentry duty by our camp and a newborn baby, her head kissed with the first buds of tight black curls, lies in her shy mother’s arms. . .

‘The rest of us will see how we go, and for the first hour or so the countryside does its best to woo us as we snake through paradise-like village gardens and cross crystal rivers and rickety log bridges. The idyll is short-lived and by midmorning we are once again entrenched in the seesaw of sickening climbs followed by hairy descents.

‘Psychologically, however, something has shifted within most of us. Our whingeing has waned: we know we do not actually want to give up. If we survived the day before we can survive anything, and our bodies are spurring us on by proving they have purged themselves of the worst of the pain.

‘We never stop hurting, but few of us hurt like we did and a numbing exhaustion gradually replaces the jabbing pangs. One hundred kilometres through dense jungle? We are now really aware of just what that means, of just how hard it will be, but we are also aware that if we want to do it we probably can, it is up to us.

‘There are things we need to call on from within ourselves – grit and determination, Charlie calls it – and things we need to draw on from the group – support and friendship – in order to meet the challenge. . .

‘The next day we walk and walk, up one of the toughest rises yet, down some of the worst.

‘We try to stop quantifying. What is worse, anyway? All the climbs are mongrels and even on a good day there is nowhere I ever want to be except out of there. But something keeps us going, keeps us dragging foot after foot. Every step completed is one that never has to retrace.

‘Up, down. Up, down. Around, across. Up, up, up.

‘That afternoon we reach our nirvana – the village of Naduri. It is the home of our guides and we arrive to a hero’s welcome. Les leads us triumphantly in and we are met by the village elders – the original war-time “fuzzy-wuzzy angels” who carried the injured Diggers out against all odds down dangerous narrow mountain tracks.

‘A feast of food and flowers is laid out for us: mandarins, sugarcane, baked and steamed taro, pumpkin tops, potatoes, spinach.

‘We fall quiet as these old men stand tall and proud. Charlie seizes the moment, the women and children are banked up around, and in a gesture that cuts across cultures and through language barriers he recites the poem that immortalised these angels. The old men beam, and our army of trekkers wipe away tears.

‘It is as if we have arrived. Somewhere, anywhere. Our guides sit with us, their families join us, and the village and its people become imprinted in our hearts. Another woman and I join the evening church service and are entranced as the pastor, his face illuminated by a hurricane lamp, recites the prayers in pidgin and the children’s voices rise in harmony so sweet we never want it to end.

‘We are silent as we get up from the rough-hewn pew. At that moment we have experienced life at its most perfect, superb in its simplicity, and suddenly we realise that the walk was worth it, if only to find this. Peace and joy are tangible, if fleeting, qualities and we know that where we are going to, where we have come from, we will probably never find it again. We want to seal the village in barbed wire and never let the world touch it. . .

‘When we finally enter sleepy, tiny Kokoda, drenched in sunshine, we are surely as triumphant as the troops who re-entered it that same morning 50 years before. We assemble at the commemorative ceremony, attended by a lowly Australian Government minion and a handful of veterans and as the Last Post sounds pitifully on a crackling portable tape recorder we are truly moved. We have done it. We understand as only those who have done it can. Our peace-time journey has tested and pushed us as we could never have imagined. The silent respect we pay to the young men who served and suffered along the path we have crossed is deep. As we clamber aboard the truck that has come to take us to the airport we have no doubt we are now invincible. We have plummeted to our worst lows and soared to our greatest heights . . .

‘There is nothing physically or emotionally we cannot endure. We had set off as 34 individuals, half of us Australians and half of us Papuan villagers. When we part we are friends – an indivisible and strong unit for whom farewells come hard.

‘If the spirit of Kokoda is strength in adversity, courage and mateship that spirit has been seeded in us all. We cross in a brief 20 minutes what has taken us eight gruelling days.

‘And like all those who crossed it before us, who left their souls in the mud and the heat and the terrifying jungle, few will ever go back.

‘Charlie, of course, is the exception. He will continue to pluck other ordinary humans from their comfortable lives and help them blossom into indefatigables, drawing on the greatness that lies largely unchallenged within us all. For the rest of us though, Kokoda will become just one humbling week in our lifetimes: albeit our whole lifetimes lived in just one unforgettably humbling week.’

