

KOKODA – IN THE SHADOWS OF THE BRAVE

A journey from Owers' Corner to Kokoda by sixteen members of the Hay Travelscene group - 4th July to 11th July 2010. By C.D.McClelland

We set off with great purpose for ahead of us in all its formidable tropical glory awaited a challenge of a lifetime. Most of us were well prepared and aware of the mistakes and inadequacies of preceding pilgrimages. We were trained on the stairs and gym of the Hay sport's pavilion, on the green of the ovals, the riverbank, the exercise bike and the testing up and downs of the simulated daunting jungle slopes and lofty ridges of nearby National Parks. Our credibility was enhanced by the preparation given us by our marvellous Hay aerobics and Pilate's trainers. We were a like-minded group, young and old, to be bonded in adversity.

We were the team to take on the Kokoda Track with all the sanctity and reverence for those brave soldiers who trod before and gave us this freedom.

Papua New Guinea lies a mere 150 miles north of the Australian mainland and the strategic importance of Port Moresby to a ruthless enemy intent on invading Australia sixty-eight years ago was vividly brought home to us as our Air Niugini jet winged its way high above the Coral Sea.

We arrived at Jackson International Airport (formerly Seven Mile), Port Moresby to a tumultuous welcome from the No Roads indigenous staff, porters and families. Sensibly with two days to acclimatize and explore the city, the heat and humidity would not be an overbearing problem on the track, rather a benefit from the cooling effect of copiously evaporating sweat.

With the pleasures of food and alcohol and city sightseeing behind us we light-heartedly set off from our hotel by mini-bus for Owers' Corner, stopping on the way at the Bomana War Cemetery to pay homage to the fallen Australians from the Pacific War. Respectfully, with hat in hand it was a solemn but proud moment as we overlooked the immaculate green lawn with its sea of inscribed white marble headstones in their long silent regimented lines. The cemetery is maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and contains 3779 burial sites, the largest in the Pacific area. As I walked down row upon row of headstones the age of those at rest brought tears to the eyes. Most were between 18 and 35 years of age, sacrificed in the prime of life, many a third my age. The solemn ode to the fallen was painfully felt – 'They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old.' These were the men who gave their today for our tomorrow.

We disembarked our vehicle again at the small plateau of Owers' Corner to meet an orderly scene of sixteen backpacks already placed neatly in a row on the rich green, close-cropped lawn. Thirty-three native porters stood in groups awaiting orders. Nearby, a sheltered 25 pounder Howitzer served as a memorial to the Australian Artillerymen of the Kokoda campaign. Three of these guns were manually dragged here and two dug in and sighted on the Japanese front-line, Ioribaiwa Ridge, 10 kilometres away. It took approximately 25 seconds for the 78.7mm caliber shells to reach their target, passing over the jubilant Australians entrenched high on Imita Ridge. Every detonation was a great boost to Australian morale and a telling blow to the Japanese troops.

Each of us in turn was assigned a personal porter who would carry our main pack, leaving us with a daypack for water, snacks and odds and ends. Five of the group would be bravely carrying all their gear.

Our preparation and private solitude was suddenly invaded by the over-excited babble of another No Roads group as they suddenly appeared out of the depths of the valley below. Its joyous young mix-sex members, unbelievably dripping with sweat, passed through the memorial archway marking the completion of their reverse trek from Kokoda. For them it was over.

For our team it was the unknown and the experience was all ahead of us. As we gathered, each with our own expectations at the archway on the edge of the plateau, we got our first real glimpse of the famous but unwelcoming track as it plunged untamed and without regard into the depths of the brooding jungle below. Beyond this the jagged ridge lines and valleys unfolded endlessly to daunt even the most resolute traveller.

The air of euphoria quickly evaporated with the others – it was now our turn to take on this challenge and be put to the test. Ahead were 96 kilometres of some of the most rugged and remote terrain in the world.

I was determined to have a subsidiary objective and task on this expedition and that was to film the walk with a high definition video camera, the scenery, and all the participants as they trudged its entirety. I hurried down the slope a little and filmed each member confidently passing through the symbolic metal archway with the sun glinting brightly on the large bronze emblem of the revered AIF insignia atop. The designers of the arch must have had a two-way bet on offending at least some of the returned diggers by inscribing Kokoda Track on one side and the much disliked ‘Trail’ on the other!

From hereon it was a slow laborious descent down a steeply twisting narrow path amongst the kunai grass and the enveloping jungle to the Goldie River. We removed our boots and waded tentatively through the fast flowing water over slippery moss-covered stones of the crossing. After a short rest awaiting stragglers, we commenced the first major climb to the distant Imita Ridge, stopping on the way for a welcomed lunch of hot soup and Milo.

Determined to film most of the group summiting the first major climb, I worked my way to the front to do so. This set a pattern for the rest of the journey.

We rested panting on the narrow top of Imita Ridge where Australian weapon pits were still visible yet unclaimed by decades of time and the encroaching jungle. This was the last fall-back position of the Australian troops during the Japanese advance in 1942. On the 16th September 1942, Brigadier Ken Eather explained his request of withdrawal from Ioribaiwa to Imita Ridge over a spluttering telephone line to General Allen, Port Moresby, knowing the howls of criticism and derision this move would elicit from Blamey and MacArthur. This was the curt response.

‘There won’t be any withdrawal from the Imita position, Ken,’ Allen insisted. ‘You’ll die there if necessary. You understand that?’

These were harsh words by today’s standards but this was an era of do or die when wars are won by discipline, toughness and sacrifice. Capitulation was not an option.

From the ridge it was a steep descent down to our campsite at Ua-ule Creek, every step had to be purposefully placed to avoid a severe ankle injury or fall down the treacherous slopes. Although a very dry time of year, the enveloping canopy allows little sun to filter through to the track below. Consequently the surface is always slippery. Very light rain fell during the afternoon and evening but would be the only precipitation received for the whole trek.

Our campsite was in a pleasant grass clearing now in the gloom of the late afternoon shadows. It was bounded by a burbling creek and surrounded by the forbidding walls of dense jungle on the steep encircling slopes. You could imagine the eyes of the enemy observing you from concealment within. We washed our bodies and clothes in the cold stream water, filling our water bottles and camel packs in readiness of an early start tomorrow. All drinking water had to be treated with purification tablets and the addition of Staminade gave much needed energy and a more acceptable taste. The daily water intake for modern day trekkers is critical but being of an older generation and not convinced of habitual drinking, I would only drink an average of 1.86 litres daily while on the track.

The porters had already raised our individual tents and after a wholesome hot meal, most hit the sack early to rest the effects of the tiring seven hour trek. It had been a long and strenuous first day for all. Some of those who opted to carry their main packs were wishing they had not done so while several

others were finding the going much tougher than expected and were making slow progress. Many had relied on the repeated assistance of their personal porter.

The next day we were up in the dark and packed by 5.30 am after a warm night and a little light rain. We garbed ourselves with damp clothing and after putting porridge or cornflakes under our belts, set off in the strengthening light of dawn at 7.00am for the next leg of our journey. We wore sandals as we would be criss-crossing the Ua-Ule creek many times as we followed it down, wading through shallow water over slippery rocks. When we changed back to boots the easy walk was over. It was now a horrendous physical and mentally exhausting climb up the steep narrow spurs to Ioribaiwa Ridge.

Up, up, up you climb - don't look up we were told or you will chance sapping the will to go on. Concentrate on the present, mind over matter; slow, measured steps at a time – no negative thoughts. Bugger, that bloody heavy camera of mine it swings like a pendulum in front and I can't see my feet. Care in placing your feet, a slip could weaken your resolve at the wasted effort or at worst bring disaster. Don't step too long, take advantage of in-between footholds as you continue zigzagging up, up, up. Forty minutes have gone by and it's never-ending. Your heart is pounding, it's exhausting. There must be some respite soon, some levelling off however brief, to meditate and bring your heart rate down; to rest your tired aching leg muscles. You continue on already aware that the roots are slippery and dangerous; put your feet well forward. Careful of the almost vertical parts with wet clay foot-holes often hacked out by porters' machetes. The ground all along the track is walled by an almost impenetrable barrier of bush and forest trees soaring skywards towards the light. Consequently the path is largely covered by a lattice work of tree roots which hold the clay soil together, making convenient shelves in places for firm footholds.

After almost an hour there is a glimmer of light and you dare look up and minutes later the head guide turns and says, 'We'll break here.' At last you are resting on a flattish shelf or ridge top with marvellous views of the valleys below through openings in the trees. You will learn as time goes by that the secret of walking the track is not to keep stopping for a spell but maintain momentum by keeping your pace slow and steady. The best place for this is behind the lead guide. '*Pole pole,*' slowly slowly, the Africans would say on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. I filmed the leaders as they and their faithful porters slowly made the first peak, to slump thankfully to the ground for a breather in a lather of sweat. The film is a little too intimate at this stage but later will satisfy a hunger for the re-enactment of this adventure without sensitivity.

The group had strung out a little and it was still heavy going for some but with encouragement and team support their determination was admirable.

The track unfortunately is a confusion of false peaks. The hard won gain is often lost in a steep descent which is harder on the legs than the climbs, and more mentally frustrating.

The narrow path snaked up and down over the dense timbered ridges with often hair-raising slopes falling steeply each side. Occasionally we would pass the evidence of a square Australian weapon pit or a round Japanese foxhole set up beside the track to ambush the other. In most cases patrol leaders would have had little chance of survival from the first concealed burst of deadly fire.

We were lucky, we walked with no adversary.

However, one could envisage the silence shattered by an ambush, the yelling and goading of often an unseen enemy in close contact, the crackle of rifle fire, explosions of grenades and shells of mortar or mountain gun. Then there was the 'woodpecker', the Japanese Juki machine gun that spat its death slowly but surely. All this was often eclipse by a sudden charge and savage hand to hand fighting with fixed bayonet in the narrow confines of the track or clearing. An Australian soldier, mortally wounded, would sometimes crawl away into the edge of the enveloping jungle to hide and die so as not to burden his mates with unnecessary rescue and medical attention.

As we trudged on to Ioribaiwa ridge a Medevac helicopter flew over to land further along the range to evacuate a casualty of another trekking group. The porters later told us that two walkers had been lifted out today and one previously from a dislocated shoulder caused by a fall. A member of my son Lochiel's group some days ahead of us had been lifted out because of suspected cholera or maybe at worst it was mental depression. His daughter bravely continued on. Finally we reached the village clearing on the ridge and were able to look back over the dense jungle of the huge valley. Imita Ridge stood sentinel in the hazy distance.

Harassed by superior numbers and determined Japanese troops, the Australians held Ioribaiwa Ridge for seven days before retreating from here to the more defensible Imita Ridge. Ken Butcher gave us good account of the history and critical turning point of the war at this place. The Japanese, starving, low in munitions; supplies stretched beyond redemption, were given the untypical command from their superiors to 'advance to the rear!' They would now begin a long and painful withdrawal with fierce clashes with the Australians at Mount Bellamy, Templeton's Crossing, Eora Creek and Oivi, with the campaign finally culminating in the battles of the Gona-Sanananda-Buna beachhead. These were some of the bloodiest battles fought by the Australians in the II World War.

From the village it was a slow steep descent down to Ofi Creek. Again it was tough on the limbs and joints and in places almost vertical step-downs zigzagged their way below amongst the tree roots and slippery clay faces. A slip here could result in a severe injury and grasping small saplings and aerial tree roots in places, assisted the difficult descents. All along the track large fallen trees made awkward obstacles for the course. We lunched quietly at Ofi Creek, one of the many places along the track selected by the Australians as a good ambush site.

And so it went on with stops for the night at Japanese Camp, Menari, Kagi, Vavu and Alola. The days were long and for some members, nine hours of strenuous walking, often with little topographical relief other than rests along the way. Most overnight camps were on open grass lawns surrounded by jungle or on exposed ridges besides villages. Creeks or tapped and piped stream water was available for drinking, washing and ablutions. Toilets were generally an affront to sensitive noses and afforded scant privacy. The single hole in the floor required the dexterity of a nymph and practice to accurately commit without soiling your ankle-bound pants or the log decking placed over the pit full of shit! However, heaven sent eco-friendly sit-on toilets were slowly replacing these. Evening meals, cooked by the porters, were wholesome and filling. Walter, the expedition's indigenous head guide would always give us an evening briefing on the next day's trek and time of departure. The first few nights were warm and only light covering was needed but as we reached higher altitudes the sleeping bag was essential.

The mornings were generally roofed in mist or low cloud and sometimes you were in a position to get a glorious view of the valleys below as the sun glow crept above the always hidden horizon. After breakfast the porters' would pack camp and we would usually leave our campsite at 6.30am or 7.00am, the slower walkers half an hour earlier.

'Packs on; Two minutes; Move out,' Nathan our head walking guide would order in spaced sequence. I would already be out along the track or on a rise to film the first procession out for the day. For most of us the night would have surprisingly rested tired muscle and mind but it always took awhile to get back into the rhythm, the determination and spirit of Kokoda, the toughest trek in the world.

During the trek we passed through many villages and often shared the track with native people, including children, travelling between villages or on their way to Port Moresby. They carried little with them and thought nothing of being on the track for a week or more, taking short cuts over the ranges that were far more rugged than what we have experienced. A number of war time villages have since been abandoned and established by their inhabitants elsewhere along the track. The poor fertility

of the shallow forest soil once cleared, only allows the native gardens to produce food crops for a few years or more and new sites on the steep slopes have to be continually chosen. Eventually the area is exhausted around the village and they have to relocate. In stark contrast to the city of Port Moresby, all the villages we passed through were extremely clean and tidy. The immediate vicinity around the thatched huts was bare soil, swept daily, and maintained weedless in order to control mosquitoes. There were always short buffalo grass areas close by to the main village where we could camp.

There were a number of highlights experienced along the track and one was squeezing past Bill James and his offsideers. Some of our team upon recognizing Bill, pulled up and had a long yarn with him, mindful of the narrow jungle ledge we were standing on which fell away to oblivion below. Bill researched and wrote the best seller 'Field Guide to the Kokoda Track' which we all carried reverently in our packs and contained as much information as the bible. He was the cofounder of Top Deck Travel and the founding Director of Flight Centre Ltd, Australia's largest travel retailer. Bill was returning from the recently discovered battleground at Eora. Its whereabouts, now consumed by the encroaching jungle, had been known for many years by local villages and regarded as a taboo site, not wanting to offend the spirits of the visible human remains there. Consequently it was never disclosed to Australian authorities until by chance almost 68 years later. After the battle, some **sixty to seventy** Japanese soldiers were buried here in shallow graves by the Australians, and rusting weapons, helmets and neatly stacked ordnance lie as they were left all those years ago. It is possible that some uncovered scattered remains are those of Australians. It will not be open to the public until pertinent decisions are made by Military Authorities from both countries involved as this is the only untouched battle site in the world.

Although the dry season, we would still have many fast flowing streams and rivers to cross. The procedure was well organized by the lead porters. Existing single log or multi-log sapling bridges would if necessary be secured ahead with vines and a strong rope stretched across and held tautly at one end by a porter. Someone would also be in the fast flowing water downstream in case of mishap. We would cross tentatively with or without our day or main pack, holding the rope for balance, usually guided by your porter and often another behind to steady you. Concerned for the safety of my heavy video camera, I would let one of the porters take it across. I rarely saw my personal porter from one day to the next, probably intimidated by the weight of my main pack and did not have the mobility to keep up with me. He was an exception.

The track up until now was confidently achievable and those who found it tough going initially were becoming better prepared mentally. That is until 'The Wall'!

We crossed the log bridge over the Naoro River and rested in a picturesque setting amongst the trees on the bank for awhile. Soon after we moved off, the track suddenly disappeared upwards into a steep wall of jungle. It was the most exhausting fifty minutes of climbing experienced so far and on reaching the small plateau with the lead guide to rest, it was an effort to put on a brave smile and hold the camera steady enough to film each member as he or she painfully reached the comfort of this false peak. 'Hi Damien,' I would be greeted. 'Good day soldier,' I would reply.

It was hard to imagine how the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels brought down the wounded over this treacherous section of the terrain. This title of endearment was given by the Australian troops to the remarkable stamina and tendance of the native porters who ferried the wounded diggers in litters along the track to casualty dressing stations, and carried all the vital supplies to support the fighting troops. Without them it would have been impossible to have undertaken such a horrendous campaign.

The next day's trek from Menari to Kagi was considered to be the toughest, not as steep, but a long arduous nine hour day of ascents and mentally debilitating descents. There was a brighter note for the rest of the journey when the porters quipped that it would be 'downhill all the way from here' or 'not

far now!' But fortunately we were slowly becoming streetwise to their casual handling of the English language and took this with a grain of salt!

Most of the porters came from Kagi and this evening was a good opportunity for them to catch up with wives and families, however brief. The village children, dressed in their bright yellow school uniforms, welcomed us into the village with garlands and their beautiful singing voices. Of course we had to survive the initial fierce onslaught when two young boys raced at us shouting and brandishing make-believe spears and making stabbing motions at us. The laughter from the other school children softened the seriousness of it all and we realised it was a re-enactment of a traditional highland welcome of which the recipients must face the adversary and hold steadfast without flinching!! We were also treated by village children, teachers and parents singing to us in the evening after dinner at Menari and here at Kagi. They have wonderful singing voices and their added comedy performance with its accompanying shyness was most amusing if not humbling!

During the trek a few of the team diverted from our planned route to visit the village of Naduri, the home of one of the few surviving Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels, Ovuru Ndiki. When Walter our head guide was questioned about his authenticity, he overly paused, grinned widely and said evasively, 'You'll probably find him a very interesting fella to talk to.' We had just met another look-alike at Kagi claiming to be a young but unlikely 102 year old, identically bedecked in military hat, coat, medals, badges, and paraphernalia given him by trekkers over the years. Both shrewd entrepreneurs charged a fee for the privilege of being photographed with them.

After Kagi we trekked through the heavily wooded range of giant trees and huge pandanus palms, their canopies shielding the forest floor from the sun. The leaf-littered floor is covered in moss and fungus and the trees draped in lichens. Many birds can be heard singing in the tree tops but are difficult to see. Beautiful butterflies are often quite numerous around water points.

After reaching our campsite early in the afternoon, five of us took an alternate track to visit the site of an American B25 Mitchell bomber wreck. The aircraft disappeared during operations against the Japanese and was thought to have been shot down. The impact created a large hole and all that remains is a heap of recovered twisted metal, part of an undercarriage and propeller blade. One burst bomb casing and a complete undetonated defused 500lb bomb lie nearby. Our guide Scotty, all of twenty years plus a few, recalled the story of the aircraft coming down over the trees and added that he was just a small boy when the fresh remains of the American crew were recovered after the crash – 68 years ago!! No doubt the story of the crash was passed down from his grandfather. We paid the owner of the clearing a fee for photographs and returned to our camp.

During the journey we passed battle site after battle site of the advance or retreat of the Japanese where the Australians committed themselves with great courage and valor against impossible odds. At each place Ken Butcher gave us an informative commentary of what had taken place. Ordnance and other objects are still lying about in places beside the slowly healing scars of weapon pits or trenches/foxholes. The stories of gallantry at Brigade Hill can be emotional as is standing beside the memorial site at Isurava.

The Isurava battle site was only re-discovered in 2000 and the opening of a memorial here by prime ministers Michael Somare and John Howard in August 2002, consolidated its historical significance to Australians.

With hat in hand I solemnly walked down the beautifully kept grass lawn slopes overlooking the Eora River valley to the battlefield memorial where the poignant words COURAGE-SACRIFICE-ENDURANCE-MATESHIP are etched on the face of the rectangular standing marble plinths. About five days ago my son Lochiel stood in remembrance at a small service conducted by his group on this very spot. I only wish I could have shared this very emotional moment with him.

About 20 metres beyond the memorial is the rock where Private Bruce Kingsbury bravely won a Victoria Cross medal and sadly, where he died shot through the head by a Japanese sniper.

From here it was an easier day to our lunch stop at Deniki village on the slopes overlooking the Yodda Valley and the plateau on which the now visible village of Kokoda stands. It was then a genuine 'all downhill' trek to Kokoda past the extensively draped sloping fields of chokos, kunai grass and villages until the track levelled off somewhat onto the sloping plateau through rubber and palm oil plantations. We passed other teams of trekkers during the day going the opposite way, some already doing it tough on these gentle slopes. If only they knew what was ahead of them. Only hours ago we passed a small brass plaque on top of a rise marking the place where a walker had died of a heart attack. Days further back another marker commemorated the spot where a 35 year old man died beside the famous track.

It was with a feeling of euphoria when the team reached the hospital gates at Kokoda, the end of the track. I filmed each member as they quietly and proudly reached the finish of this incredible journey. Each fulfilled a purpose in his or her own way. It was a moment celebrated quietly with reticence but nevertheless, with strong inner emotional feelings of an ultimate achievement. Such contrast to the whooping and noise and high fives of the unreserved generation of youth who completed their trek at Owers' Corner seven days ago.

For all of us it was the challenge, the experience beyond our comfort zone and present day values. But deeper than this was the compelling urge for some of us to seek the spirit and meaning of a historic campaign that greatly affected our parents, family and all Australians of that era, beyond present day comprehensions. For some less travelled it would have a lasting effect on their lives and for me it would strengthen my resolve to abhor the scribes who manipulate the historical facts to suit an ideology and make retrospective and narrow judgment on past eras, clouded by the comfort and misunderstandings of the 21st century.

It was a restful night on the lawn of our picturesque campsite at Kokoda after a meal and celebration with appropriate oration acknowledging the great contribution our friendly and much respected porters made to our journey. Like the troops all those years ago we were very much dependent on their care and amazing strength along that gruelling track.

The next morning we paid brief homage to the white stone cairns of the Kokoda Memorial perched on an edge of the plateau. As I looked north-eastwards from here towards the Pacific Ocean in reminiscence, I envisaged the ghosts of the Japanese soldiers before me, pursued and harassed unmercifully by the Australian troops as they retreated to the beachheads at Gona, Sanananda and Buna to consolidate and make a final life and death stand.

I was almost one year old when my uncle Dick Harrowell went into action with A Company of the 2/12th Battalion, 18th Brigade AIF to attack four positions of the well entrenched enemy in their pillboxes and trenches at Giropa Point, Buna on New Year's Day 1943. Around 3 o'clock that afternoon a Japanese 2 inch mortar bomb exploded close by seriously wounded him, killing and wounding his mates around him. As he lay in the metre high kunai grass, punctured in fourteen places by countless fragments of shrapnel, a passing soldier marked Dick's body by driving his fallen rifle, bayonet first, into the ground beside him. It was a day of heavy casualties and it was sometime before he was located and picked up by exhausted stretcher bearers. A serious wound to his stomach was operated on that night by surgeon Captain Felix Shwartz of the American 23rd Portable Field Hospital which had fortunately just moved up behind the battle front. Several days later eight Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels carried him in four man shifts, one of them holding a palm leaf over his face to keep the sun off, on an arduous half day trek to the 2/5th Casualty Clearing Station. After a delay caused by Japanese Zero activity he was taken from there by jeep to Dobodura airfield to be airlifted over the Owen Stanley's by a Dakota C47, with its white American crosses, to the mainly canvas covered 2/9th Australian General Hospital, Port Moresby. His brothers, Jim a Captain in the 2/1st AIF Anti Aircraft (Ack-Ack) Regiment, and John a distinguished Captain in the 2/6th AIF Field Artillery both served

here in New Guinea after returning from the Middle East theatre of war, together with Margie's father Harry Christoe also of the 2/6th Battalion Field Artillery Regiment.

We set off in heavy mist for the easy twenty minute walk to the airstrip and eventually arrived at what could be termed the 'official terminal' beside a large palm oil plantation. Grace Eroro, Kokoda Postmistress and PNG Airlines representative sat cross-legged on the concrete pad of the simple tin roof, open-sided shelter and began working out the manifest with pencil and paper and a set of scales hanging by a knotted cord from the rafters! Her husband, Kingsley, together with nine Australian No Road Expedition trekkers and guide, two crew and a Japanese passenger died in a DHC-6 plane crash which occurred in bad weather on the slopes just behind us. The story of the thirteen fatality disaster on the 11th August 2009 made overseas headlines.

And so there was great concern when mental arithmetic revealed that we were 153 kgs overweight! It was now up to the chief pilot to make a final decision on arrival. With plane crashes in mind and the overpowering presence of the ranges looming ominously but without clarity through low cloud behind us, there was tension amongst the troops! We had already been advised that the aircraft had left Port Moresby. Twenty minutes later the delayed aircraft came through the Kokoda Gap in the mountain crest and thankfully the low cloud cover was clearing again for the second time this morning.

This was a specially chartered flight by No Roads Expeditions and fortunately through Tertia's timely scrutiny it was discovered we had two interlopers comfortably sitting without cost on the manifest! With just the legitimate sixteen of us and our luggage to board, our surplus was suddenly rubbed out by Grace, our innovative cross-legged official and with two deft strokes of her pencil we were under the 1000 kg payload limit of the de Havilland Twin Otter (DHC-6)! Joined by two happy pilots, our two powerful 550 shp Pratt and Whitney turboprops were soon lifting us effortlessly over the rugged Owen Stanley Range and we all gazed down with relief and awe at the jungle and meandering traces of that impossible track below - a nightmare for some but an inspiration to all.

The team parted in Port Moresby, most to return to the immediate drudgery of civilian life while some of us were to enjoy the brevity of R&R in paradise on Loloata Island just off Port Moresby for three days. Like General MacArthur and with perhaps less certainty, some of us vowed to return, maybe take on the track again with grandchildren!!

I think for all those who wish to take on this arduous journey that foremost it must be with the knowledge and spirit of those brave men, who against all odds, heroically stood up in defense of our nation against a determined and ruthless foreign invader.

To retrace their gallant exploits over the same ground once saturated with their blood and remembering the noble sacrifice of such young lives, installs a strong sense of pride and place in being an Australian.

Otherwise the trek becomes a very much temporary personal challenge of mind and body without the passion and everlasting richness of meaning and purpose.

No peacetime expedition under such hazardous conditions could have run so smoothly without the intensive planning beforehand by Tertia and Ken Butcher and Travelscene, Hay. The pre-tour weekend training trials established a unique advantage of monitoring fitness and importantly, bonding the team, all of which augured well for the great success of the journey for everyone who participated.

The Kokoda Track is a billion steps any one of which the average Western human being in a lifetime would sensibly try to avoid.

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