

# PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Words **Helen Pitt** Photography **Valerie Martin**

## KOKODA TRAVELS

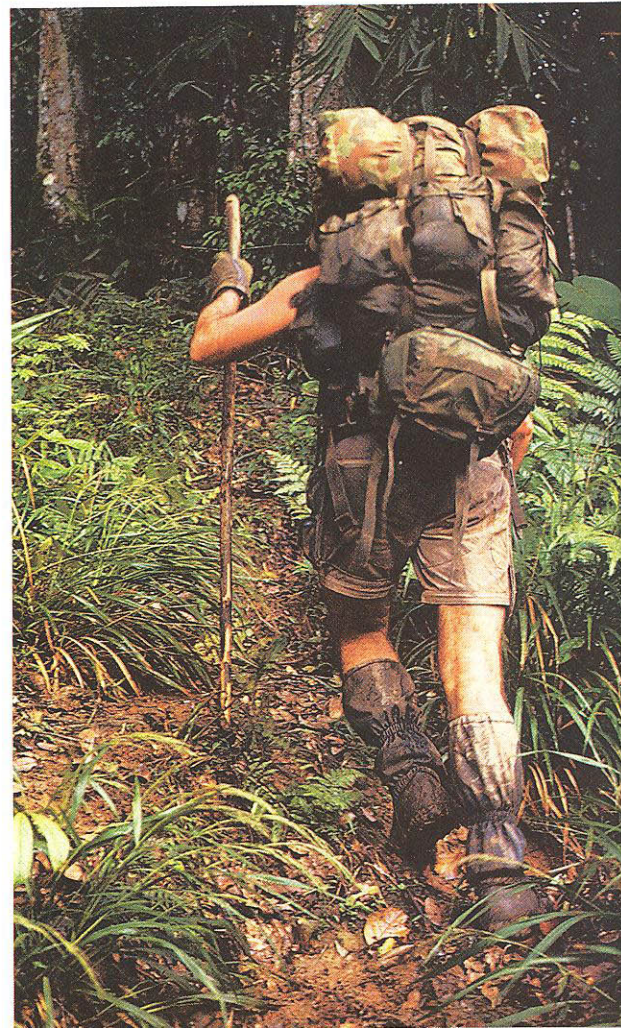
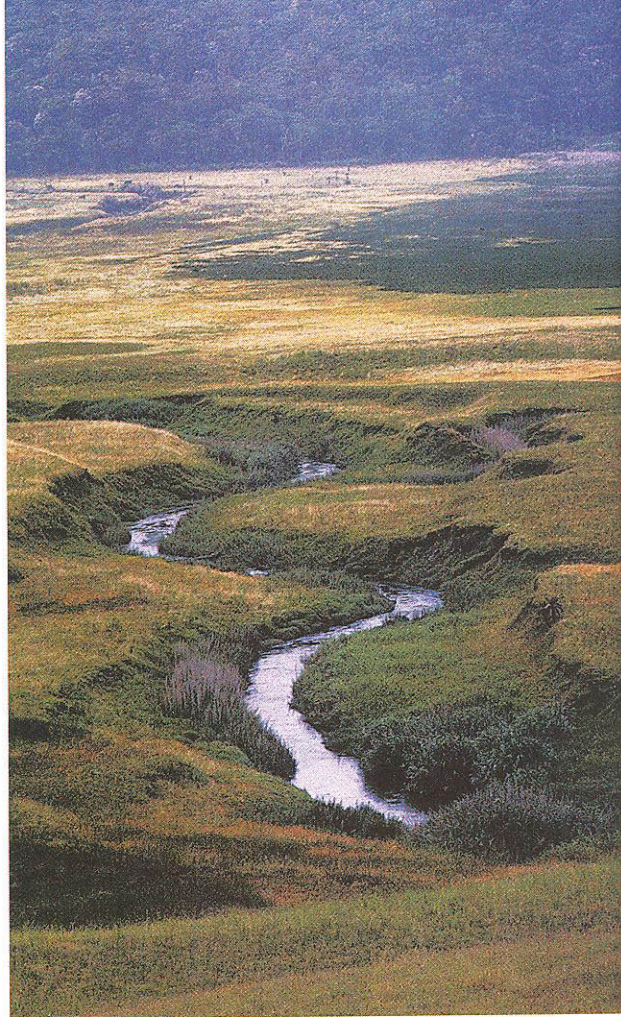
GO JUNGLE TREKKING WITH THE GHOSTS OF DIGGERS AND FUZZY WUZZY ANGELS ALONG PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S HISTORIC KOKODA TRAIL.

**T**rack or trail – that is the big question when it comes to Kokoda. What do you call one of the most significant World War II battle-grounds on what was once Australian territory?

Australians who fought Japanese troops along this treacherous 100km stretch of terrain in Papua New Guinea will tell you “it’s a bloody track”, which indeed it was in 1942 and 1943. But we have US General Douglas MacArthur to thank for calling it a trail in media reports aimed at an American audience. The name has simply stuck. The Papua New Guineans have settled on a compromise – the sign at the start of the track says “Kokoda Trail – National Walking Track”. But ask any of them and they’re bound to call it a footpath; lantana-lined and beautiful, but just a jungle walkway.

So how did this humble path from the village of Kokoda to Owens Corner enter the Australian national lexicon?

The Australian Army lost 607 diggers in the Owen Stanley Ranges, with 1015 more soldiers wounded. Thousands of men were stricken with malaria and other tropical illnesses. War historians say the battles fought on the Kokoda Trail were vital in saving Australia from Japanese invasion in World War II. In fact, they call them the most significant Australian battles because their outcome so directly affected the security of the nation. ➤









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For Japanese soldiers they were also significant – it was the nation's first defeat in World War II.

So how did 6000 young Australians – untrained and many still in their teens – defeat one of the world's most disciplined armies when they were outnumbered six to one? How did they deal with the difficult conditions? As Australian wartime journalist Osmar White says of Kokoda in his classic study of Papua New Guinea, *Parliament Of A Thousand Tribes*: "What an ordinary relief map will not show, or even suggest, is the violence of the terrain, the dizzy heights of its peaks, the depths of its ravines, the expanse of its swamps... few if any equivalent areas on earth are subject to such physical fragmentation or to such contrast."

That the Australian soldiers survived and conquered is thanks largely to the efforts of native Papuans – whom they called "fuzzy wuzzy angels". These locals carried supplies and injured soldiers on makeshift stretchers up and down the track. They went without food and sleep to save Australian

troops, yet were never paid any compensation by the Australian government.

This is one issue that continues to haunt many Australians who visit this historic spot. It's certainly a preoccupation of the man who is the most experienced non-Papuan trekker of the Kokoda Trail, Charlie Lynn.

Lynn believes the Kokoda campaign will take its place alongside Gallipoli in defining Australia's national character. A former army officer who is now a member of the New South Wales parliament's upper chamber, Lynn was moved by the Kokoda story the first time he visited in 1976. As it was a uniquely Australian campaign – no American, British or New Zealand troops were involved – Lynn is puzzled why its heroes are not better known.

"What a pity that Australians know more about Davy Crockett and the Alamo than they do about Private Bruce Kingsbury, who was awarded the first Victoria Cross on Australian-administered territory at Isurava," Lynn says.

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Determined to do something about this, Lynn established Adventure Kokoda, a company that has since led more than 30 treks along the track. A percentage of the company's profits are given to the people who live there. Trekkers who take Lynn's tours learn the stories of the track's heroes and major battles. Names such as Brigade Hill, Ioribaiwa Ridge and the 39th Battalion become real rather than mere history lessons.

On Anzac Day last year, in an effort to show some appreciation to the locals, Lynn helped launch a foundation to support the health, educational and sporting needs of villagers on the Kokoda Track. The Sydney Swans AFL club, whose players regularly climb the track as pre-season training, is a major contributor.

Anyone who loves to walk, and does strength and aerobic exercises for at least an hour a day leading up to the trek, will be able to cope with the Kokoda Trail. But why would you risk leeches, malaria, blister and tinea and call it a holiday? The answer

is simple. In 1992, I was the first of many journalists to accompany Lynn along the track. For me, the Kokoda Trail is a metaphor for life – sometimes you've got to sink low into the valleys to appreciate the view from the mountains. Of all the trips I've taken, no souvenir or photograph will ever equal what I took away from Kokoda – the courage to face whatever peak or valley was put in front of me, just like an Australian or Japanese soldier, or a local villager.

*Adventure Kokoda treks cost \$4500, which includes return airfare from Sydney and all internal flights. For details call (07) 5535 9000 or visit [www.adventurekokoda.com](http://www.adventurekokoda.com)*



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