

Happy days: the beginning of the trail, when everyone thought it would be a picnic.

Lessons in life

Can walking 100 kilometres in putrid conditions on the Kokoda Trail really turn a group of errant teenagers into worthwhile members of society?

Sarah Ford went along to find out.

Thump. April Rumble, 17, slips, her face slamming against the side of a muddy mountain. Her soft, tanned hands bear the scars of nearly 13 hours of trekking through the jungle of Papua New Guinea. April's a large-framed girl with a head full of African-inspired braids. At first glance she looks like the kind of teen you'd find hanging out at the local McDonald's, brimming with attitude. Ankle-deep in the rough scrub of the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea, she's a long way from her comfort zone. She is starting to smell of jungle rot, a mix of mud and sweat that defies repeated applications of her 24-hour Rexona Sport deodorant. Exhausted, her body aching from hauling a 30-kilogram pack up an almost vertical climb and her army fatigues dripping with swamp water after wading across a snaking river six times, April breaks down in a heavy sob. "I can't keep going. That's it, I'm going home."

HOME IS A LONG WAY AWAY. THE NEWCASTLE teenager is one of three girls and seven boys attempting to walk the forbidding track through the Owen Stanley Mountain Range, running from Owen's Corner north-east of PNG capital Port Moresby to the Kokoda township in the north, known as the Kokoda Trail. The aim of the group is to march like victorious warriors into Kokoda village, 100 kilometres downtrack and 12 days away. The bunch of 15- to 18-year-olds from NSW and Tasmania are here care of Youth Insearch, a peer support program for some of the country's most disadvantaged children.

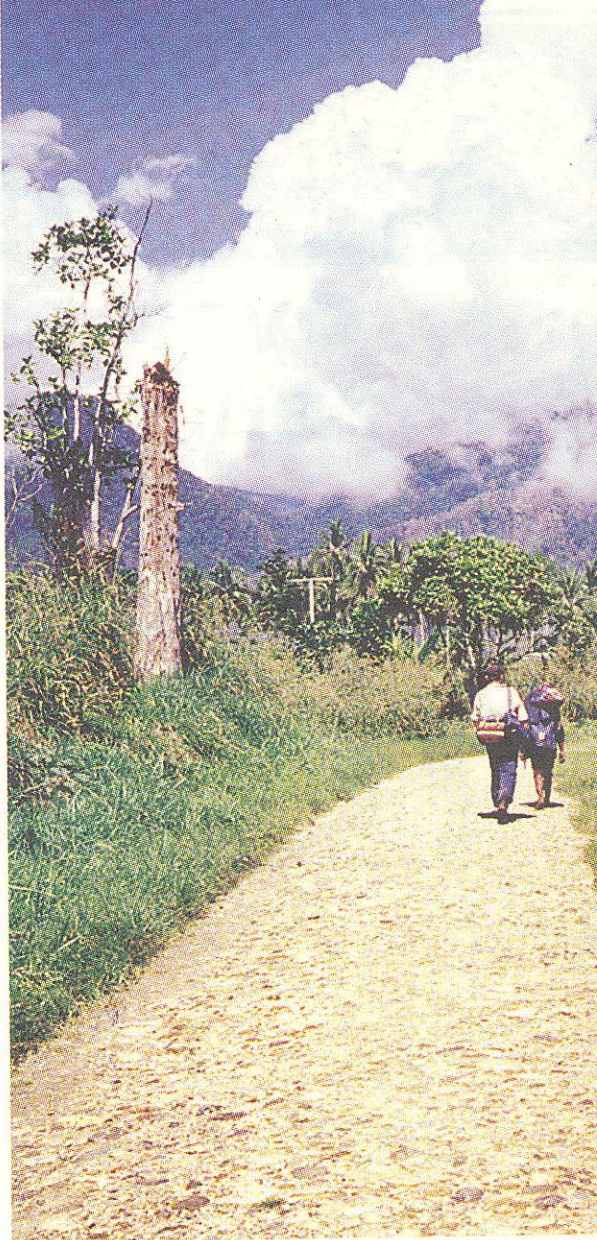
Most of the teens on this trek were referred to Youth Insearch through their local schools, police or community centres. Nearly all have a history of sexual abuse, drug or alcohol addiction, attempted suicide or criminal offences. Hiking the Kokoda Trail (along with other adventures organised by YIS) is an attempt to give the group a stronger sense of self-discipline and a better chance to overcome their financial and emotional limitations. But the organisers of the trek see it as something more. It's a history lesson, a tool to help young Australians understand what their countrymen went through more than 50 years ago.

Each member of the team raised the \$5000 for the trip by themselves or with the help of family and community groups such as RSLs. Two film crews from Channel 7's *Witness* program are also along for the ride, recording the whole expedition and hyping the pressure of the challenge. They view the trek as a social experiment: can a 12-day

adventure really change a child who has had so many black marks against him or her? About 30 Kioari porters and guides, smelling strongly of tobacco and body odour, are carrying the team's equipment and supplies on their backs and chests. These sinewy men with wide, laughing grins have replaced their elders as the Fuzzy Wuzzy angels for today's Kokoda battlers. Every second one seems to be named Jacob or Isaac after the Seventh Day Adventist religion that missionaries brought to the region.

YIS co-founder Judith Barr, a trained nurse, and Rhondda Vanzella, one of NSW Liberal backbencher Brendan Nelson's staff, who is researching the program in a bid to secure Federal funding, are also on board. Charlie Lynn, 53, NSW MLC for Campbelltown and former army major, is leading the 50-strong entourage as they trace the once-deadly path that Australian soldiers trod in 1942, fighting Japanese attempts to invade the great southern land and win the war in the Pacific. His salt-and-pepper moustache sits on a deeply lined face. His taut, youthful body is clothed in baggy army fatigues and he wears his black shirt neatly tucked in and belted. His only concession to the heat is a neck towel and rolled-up shirt sleeves.

Lynn is the taskmaster who never sways from the rule book, inspiring admiration one minute, death threats the next. His gruff voice is measured, rarely raised. He has walked the trail many times, generally taking people aged over 20 who have been sent by their corporate employers in the hope it will instill leadership qualities. He tests their mettle with a hefty dose of self-discipline, leadership and team skills. Lynn is on a crusade to





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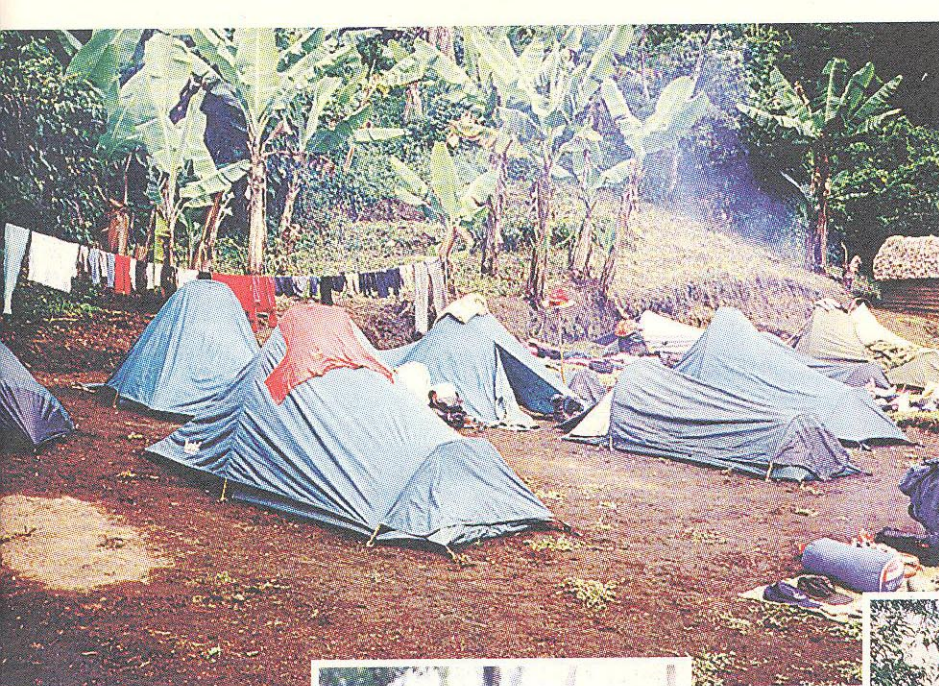
teach young Australians about the outnumbered and outgunned diggers who forced the northern enemy to retreat, helping to turn the war around.

None of the Youth Insearch kids knew anything about the Kokoda story. One boy thought it was a type of cake. The team is constantly reminded by Lynn that their soldier counterparts of 55 years ago were mostly barefoot, half-clothed, without sleeping gear or lighting, near starvation and diseased.

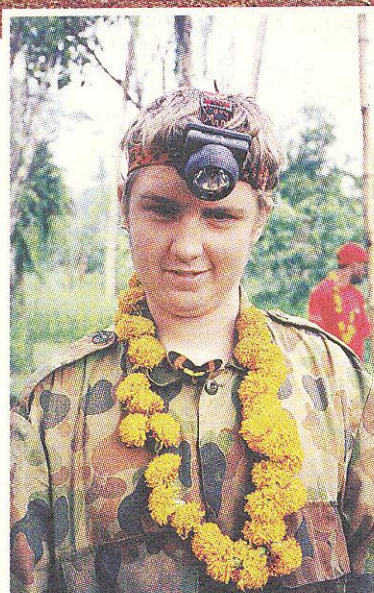
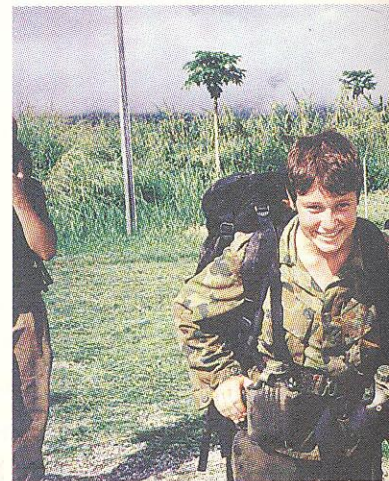
5AM AT THE UA ULE CAMPSITE: THERE ARE NO marshmallows roasting on an open fire, no log cabins in which to escape the chilly dawn air. This is a bug-infested flat with the kind of dampness that sets in your bones. April fumbles through her backpack for soap to wash herself in the nearby icy creek, tears still running down her face. She stumbles out of her tent after three hours' sleep and vomits from dehydration before setting off again. She will have to walk through the day and well into the night.

The fresh-faced teen leaving Sydney for Port Moresby on her first aeroplane trip only a day and a half ago is hardly recognisable. The girl who said there was no doubt she could do it: "I know I'm in for a shock and it will hit me hard," she said the night before she left. "I know I'll break down and cry. I'm scared of heights and small, restricted areas. But I have a lot of willpower and that's what will get me through."

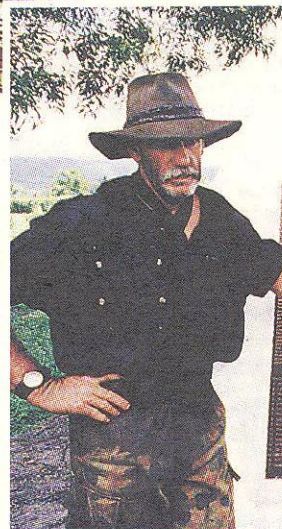
Now, in the thick of it, she's not quite so positive: "This is the worst night of my life and the hardest thing I've ever done." But April gives the impression the Kokoda Trail is only one of many obstacles she's had to face. "I used to run amok. I



Left: one of the few decent camp stops – later in the trek the crew walked through the night to make schedule.



Right: Michael Holt in a jolly mood – back home his dad's in jail.



liked going out and getting drunk," she says. She started drinking aged 12 and quit school after year 11 because she was fed up with the system. "I like my freedom and like to get up and walk out when I want to."

Her father, an undertaker and mother, a masseuse, divorced when April was three. Since then she has lived with both of them on and off, as well as a range of friends. April has done a secretarial course at TAFE and is training to become a Youth Insearch leader, although her long-term goal is to run her own beauty salon, preferably on the Gold Coast. She's been coming to YIS camps for years, although she's never done anything like this before. Completing the Kokoda is part of her initiation to leader status.

On the other side of the campsite, sweat is still dripping down Michael Holt's chubby cheeks. Zombie-like, the 17-year-old YIS trainee leader from Newcastle peels off his wet fatigues and pulls on a dry navy blue Hanes tracksuit before putting up his tent and crawling into his sleeping bag. The year 12 student, whose most strenuous activity until now had been the five-minute stroll to school, is dreaming of a cheeseburger, fries and a large Coke. Even sweeping the floors at Red Rooster, where he will start working the week he returns, is looking good.

Michael has lived in 16 different places, including friends' homes and youth refuges, since leaving home two-and-a-half years ago. He bought a mobile phone because he got sick of changing phone numbers. He doesn't know where his sister is, his brother lives with an aunt and his grandmother, the relative he was closest to, died recently. His father

is serving time in Junee Prison for sexual abuse. It took Michael a week and a half to get both parents to sign his passport. "It took me about five goes to get mum at home because she has no phone," he says. "I had to pay for the bus trips each time only to find she wasn't there."

DAY TWO: APRIL HAS THROWN OUT THE DEODORANT and hand, face and nail cream she couldn't get enough of on the first day. "I didn't want to get too dirty," she says. But lessening her load is a bigger priority than hygiene, and anyway, everyone is looking and smelling pretty ordinary by now. Her plaits are starting to resemble dreadlocks and she has grudgingly accepted that the black mud won't wash out of her white Bonds undies and sports bra. Like a machine, April is refuelling her energy with six meals a day.

As night falls a swarm of mosquitoes descends. April and the group are losing their patience. Michael, who is sitting in the middle of the jungle, halfway up a hill, crying and refusing to take one more step, is being difficult again. The team assures him he can do it, that he just needs to throw out "luxury" items: "You can use ours," they say, pleading with him to make a move. They grab his pack and in the dark they pull out soap, a towel, his tracksuit, an old pair of Slazenger sneakers and Iso sport powder for dehydration. Most of his food is also left behind: Maggi instant rice packs, sultanas, M&Ms, Smarties, Space Food bars and muesli breakfast bars. His toothbrush and toothpaste, sleeping bag, head torch, medical kit including Bushman's mosquito repellent, blister packs, malaria tablets, three one-litre water bottles and the

seeds Lynn is offering to drought-affected villages are deemed vital.

But Michael refuses to budge. Sharp pains are running up his short legs and he wishes he'd done more training, even though he lugged around his filled backpacks one weekend with the group, walked around the burbs for an hour and a half every day for two weeks and climbed a 1.6-kilometre mountain. "It's my choice, I don't want to do this," he says, breaking into a sob. "My legs aren't going to make it up this hill. They're not moving."

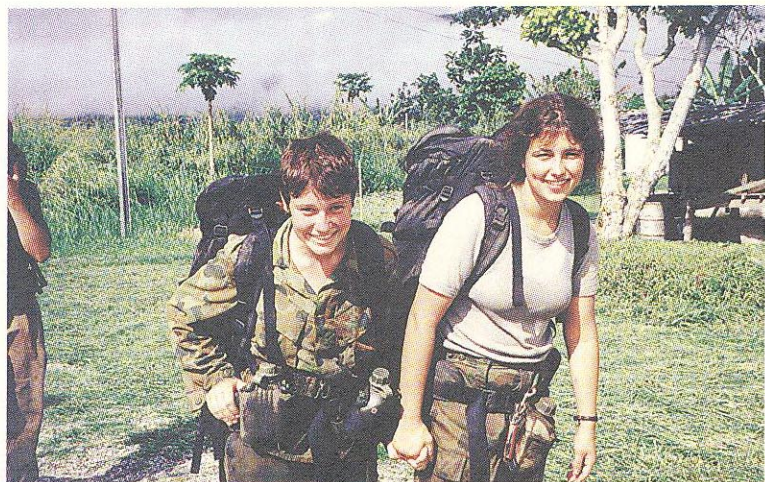
Lynn's patience is wearing thin: "Listen mate, you volunteered for this program. Did you know what you were in for? How much training did you do? How do you think the diggers would have done with a Jap coming at them..." Eventually Lynn resigns himself to the situation and carries the defeated boy's pack up the hill – the signal Michael has failed the challenge and is no longer part of the team.

But it's strange to see that quivering lip. Only hours ago Michael was a cocky teen, busting for the challenge. "I'm really sick in the stomach with eagerness to get there, get it over and done with and say I've done it, I've walked the Kokoda," he said. "I'm at the end already mentally." By giving up he knows he's not just letting himself down, the trip is being sponsored to the tune of \$5000 by the son of a former Kokoda soldier. "I'm disappointed and I feel bad about it," he acknowledges. Now he won't be able to lay a wreath in the major's honor on Anzac Day at the end of the trip.

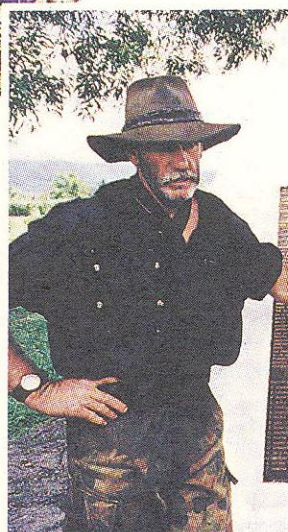
Michael was the only one who didn't volunteer for the trek. He thought he was

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Left: one of the few decent camp stops – later in the trek the crew walked through the night to make schedule.



Above: Christina MacDonald (left) and April Rumble on their way to outdoing several of the boys to finish the trek.



Left: Charlie Lynn, former army major and the trek leader – “They never stopped turning on each other.”

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Continued next page

“Do you know the difference between adventure and stupidity? You were bloody stupid, weren't you?”

CHARLIE'S ANGELS – WHO MADE IT AND WHO DIDN'T

1 Heath Ducker, 16, from Oakland, NSW: Parents separated: has never made contact with his father. Wants to be a journalist. Developed severe chest pains halfway into the trek and was forced to stop by group leader Charlie Lynn.

2 Michael Holt, 17, from Newcastle, NSW. Lives in a halfway house; father is in jail; only sees his mother occasionally. Wants to be a chef. Michael lost his will due to

physical exhaustion, and gave up halfway through.

3 Travis Ward, 16, from Newcastle, NSW: Mother died when he was five; heavy truant during schooling; learning to manage a strong temper. Currently working as a jackaroo. Slipped and fell, tearing ligaments and chipping his knee bone, while walking at night; evacuated by helicopter.

4 Elizabeth Frazer, 15, from Newcastle: parents separated. Wants to be a professional dancer. Experienced knee problems and gave up halfway through the trek.

5 Andrew Phelan, 17, from Launceston, Tasmania. Wants to be a chef. He twisted his knee halfway along the trek and was unable to continue.

6 April Rumble, 17, from Newcastle: parents separated. Currently unemployed. Successfully completed the trek.

7 Christina MacDonald, 15, from

Newcastle: parents separated. Currently studying languages. Successfully completed the trek.

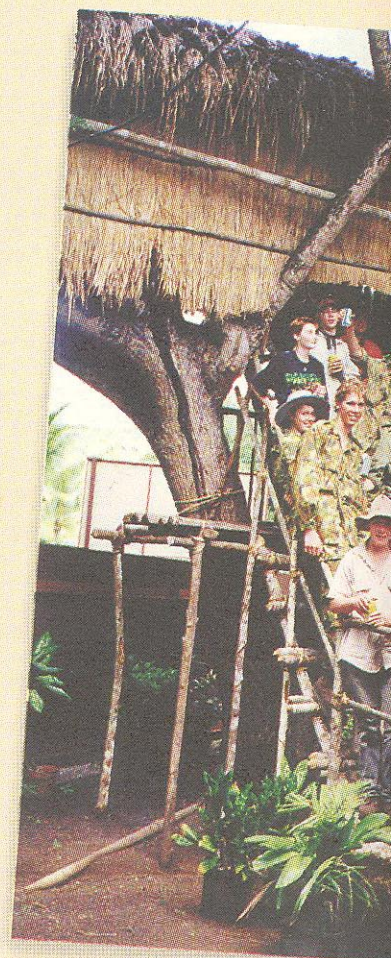
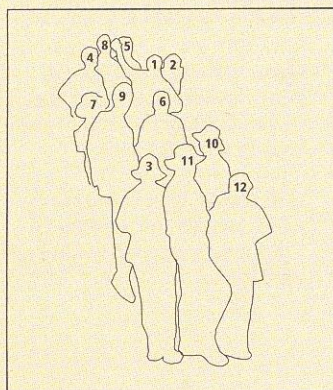
8 Chris Berry, 17, from Wellington, NSW. Parents separated. Wants to be a youth worker. Successfully completed the trek.

9 Anthony Humphries, 18, from Sackville, NSW. Both parents committed suicide. Currently working on his autobiography; wants to be a psychiatrist. Successfully completed the trek.

10 Heath Livingstone, 16, from Nowra: parents separated. Currently at school; wants to be a policeman. Successfully completed the trek.

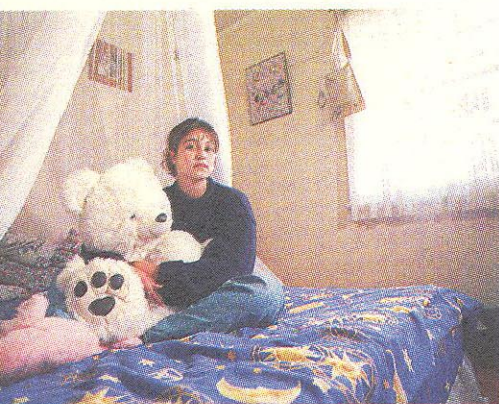
11 Charlie Lynn, 53, former army major and now a professional motivator. Has been leading groups on the Kokoda Trail since 1992. In 1995 he was elected to the Legislative Council of the NSW Parliament.

12 Judith Barr, the medic for the trekkers.



Continued from previous page too unfit and had no way of getting the money together. It was YIS founder Ron Barr who helped him find the cash and coax him into it, promising, "You'll come back a man."

The stench of body odour is unbearable. The group's pain threshold has long since been crossed. Their feet are covered in blisters and when their socks are peeled off they reveal cases of tinea and fungus. Conquering one mountain means facing another. Walking uphill is a killer and back down equally painful as legs wobble and fold, making backside-travelling the best option. Most of the time, if the trekkers aren't dripping with sweat from the beating sun and muggy jungle air, they're sodden by torrential downpours or wading through rivers. (Rain-damaged equipment cost the camera crew around \$30,000.)



April Rumble back home: "It was a good lesson for us."

DAY FOUR: APRIL AND MOST OF THE gang arrive at Menari Village mid-afternoon, straining to keep their eyes open, a full day behind schedule. They have walked through the night for two of the three nights, falling asleep on five-minute rests and often arriving at campsites starved but too tired to lift spoon to mouth.

Today is no different, except this time a spirited community gathering of traditional dancing, speeches and flower necklaces greets them. Obligated to sit through the performance, the teens sway with exhaustion, barely able to clap their hands in appreciation. An hour later the stragglers – Michael and three others who are pulling out and catching a flight from the village back to Port Moresby – dribble in. Michael and Elizabeth Frazer, a reed-thin 15-year-old, from Wingham,

northern NSW, have given up, while Andrew Phelan, 17, from Launceston, Tasmania, has sprained his knee and Heath Ducker, 16, from Parramatta, western Sydney, has chest pains.

Michael is sombre, though he does manage to rouse himself enough to taunt the group about his return to dual-flush toilets, shampoo and conditioner, his first can of Coke and entering the Golden Arches at Sydney Airport. The stayers, who are feasting on local fruit and vegetables such as salted cucumber, bananas and orange watermelon, are left licking their wounds and smearing themselves with mosquito repellent in preparation for their night walk. They offer Michael few farewell hugs and plenty of ridicule. "I just want to say I'm glad you wasted Youth Insearch's money and you didn't stick it out and you didn't help anyone," April shouts. Travis Ward, 16, a stocky Novocastrian wearing a battered Akubra, hugs him. "Michael, mate, I do love you but you've just let us down." Travis, a former drinker, drug-taker and petty criminal turned jackaroo, is shaping up as the major team motivator.

As the failed members of the group prepare to leave, Lynn begins to muse over the drop-outs. The film crew jumps up and the camera rolls as Lynn gives Michael a thorough dressing-down in front of the group. "I don't think you tried at all," he says calmly. "You gave up on the first couple of steps. You don't have a survival attitude and if you were left there you would die because you have no will to live, mate. So you've got a lot of very deep thinking to do about what it's all about, the purpose of life, your own destiny and it's serious stuff. Because you're wanting desperately in those areas."

The remaining hikers, just six of the original 10, head off again, singing top 40 songs as they cross the village airstrip at dusk and descending into a valley that meets the gruelling Brigade Hill. They compare the virtues of the numerous *Police Academy* movie sequels, repeat lines from them and popular

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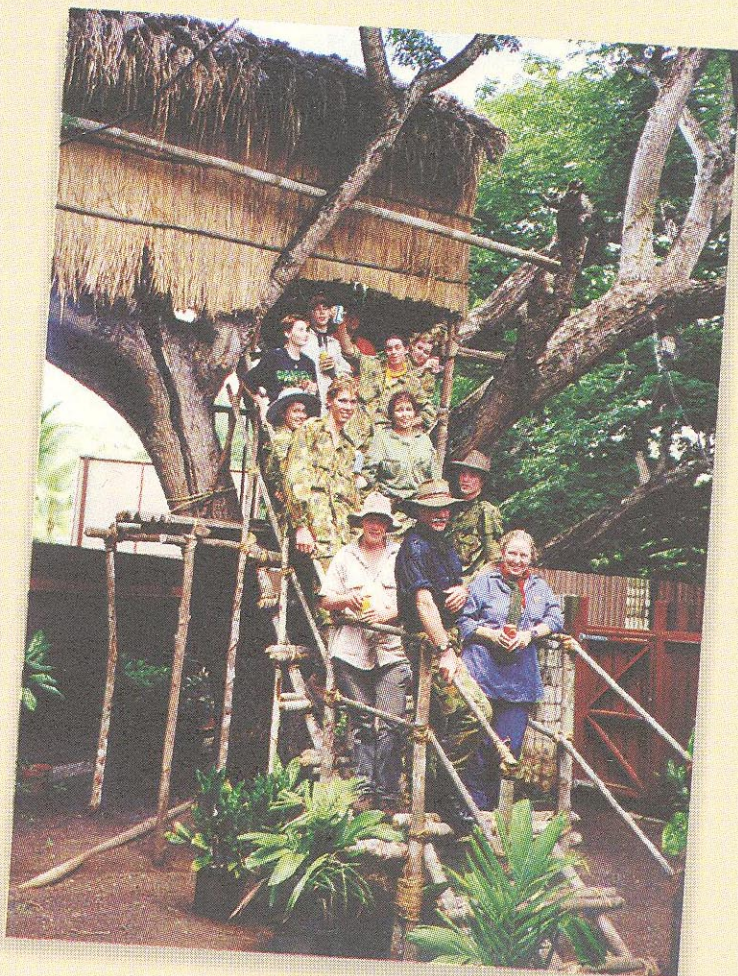
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cartoons and revel in dirty jokes. Lynn calls this mindless banter "Nintendo mode".

But the chatter soon ends when Christina MacDonald, 15, from Newcastle, breaks down in tears. She says her pack is too heavy. Riding a bike from Byron Bay to Sydney to raise funds for the trip was hard yakka but it doesn't compare to this agony, she says. One of the boys, the one that had been holding her hand the evening before, goes over and tries to motivate the tiny girl. Grabbing her hand he drags her up and carries most of her pack.

The team moves on. After crossing a river by sliding awkwardly across a narrow tree log on their bums, the group starts climbing towards Brigade Hill. The girls begin to whine and whimper. April and Christina plead for a rest, swearing they can't take another step, then start to cry and shout abuse at the boys, who respond by telling them to shut up, keep going, you can do it. Emotions run high but cool quickly. Shortly afterwards April is singing and laughing again as each kid divulges the most embarrassing thing their parents have done to them.

Around 8pm, during a five-minute rest halfway up the hill, Lynn turns to April. It's his big chance to give her a talking-to, and you get the feeling he's been rehearsing it from day one.

"Your performance coming up here was just bloody disgraceful. How can you inspire as a leader like that? Whenever you can't get your way, April, you act like a two-year-old. You bloody shake your knees, you bloody scream out.

"Every time the going gets tough you lapse into kindergarten mode. You've got to start asking whether you should ever put yourself in a position of leadership."

No tears from April – she knows he's got a point. But by now some of the team are arguing over who should lead and when they should next rest. Lynn interrupts: "We've been discussing it now for a couple of days and it's time to either put it into action or have a deep discussion about it," he says

"Charlie's blunt, I understand that. But he was unnecessarily hard on me."

slowly. "The point is, you lack personal discipline. We're 24 hours behind schedule. You haven't gained a minute in the last two days. You wasted two hours this morning and then at Menari you wasted another hour. I'm going to set the standard until you get it right and we'll stop for five minutes every hour, on the hour. We will also be walking until tomorrow morning without a break."

The group of seven quietly recommence their dark climb, counting off army-style to ensure everyone is there. "One, two, three, four, five, six ..." Silence. "C'mon, seven!" Silence. "Seven, where are you?" Travis's upbeat voice is missing. They curse him, then grow anxious after stopping while Lynn wraps the sprained foot of Heath Livingstone, 16, from the NSW South Coast. Their cooeees disappear unanswered into the ink-black night. Has Travis fallen off a cliffside and been knocked unconscious? If so, he would be almost impossible to find.

On reaching the crest of Brigade Hill around 10pm, clouds of mist hover around the surrounding mountains and billions of brilliant stars pack the clear night sky. Travis has raced ahead of the group and is standing framed by the mountains. Lynn is fuming. "Do you know the difference between adventure and stupidity?" he yells as he grabs the startled boy by his shirt, drawing him to within an inch of his piercing eyes. "You were bloody stupid, weren't you? I'll tell you what mate, if it was up to me you'd be on the next bloody plane back because this is about bloody leadership and bloody team work and you have failed. If the team wants to keep you on board they can. I'll hand it over to them," he says, shoving Travis to the ground.

Travis is mortified. On the verge of tears but keeping a stiff upper lip, he is accepted by the group. They still want him as a member. Still shaken, they shine their head torches on the Brigade Hill Battle memorial plaque and gather around a fire to hear Lynn tell how the gaunt yet indefatigable young diggers from the 39th Battalion fought back a rearguard action from Kokoda and dug in on this very hill, despite being outnumbered six to one. Some doze and others seem in awe of the eerie but exhilarating feeling of sitting on a mass Australian grave.

By midnight the moonlight guides the weary group into the sleeping village of Efogi and they snooze on their packs or pull out packet pasta, expecting to set off again within the hour. But the film crew tries to take over, telling Lynn everyone is too exhausted and he's pushing the kids too hard. A brief argument ensues, Lynn is beaten down and the kids crawl, still dressed, into their sleeping bags.

DAY NINE: THE PAST FOUR DAYS HAVE GONE BY IN A blur, punctuated by Lynn's fierce manner and his unrelenting drive. The camera crew questions his judgment on the importance of meeting goals versus safety. Things reach a climax when Travis slips downhill while trekking at night, pulling ligaments and chipping a bone in his leg. He blames the fall on his lack of concentration (though later says Lynn lost sight of the fact that the team's lives are more important than a certificate). The camera crew manages to stop Lynn's plans for them to continue to the wreckage of a Japanese plane.

The team spends a cold and miserable night by Travis's side. The next morning porters make a stretcher and carry him out of the jungle to a clearing where a helicopter can land. He is airlifted to Port Moresby, leaving a big hole in the team: their spirits plummet despite being only one day from the finish line.

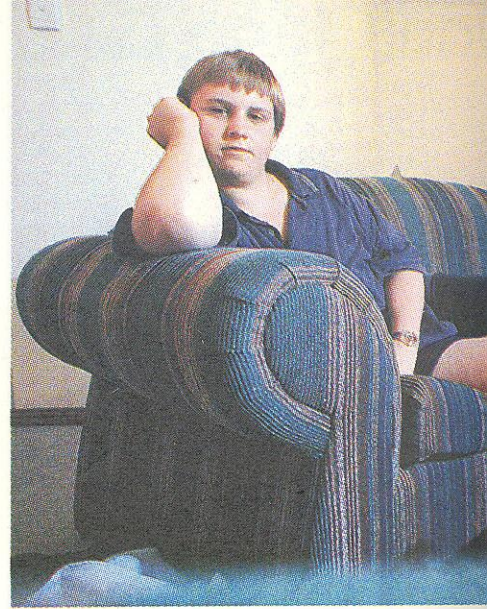
DAY 11: STILL BICKERING AMONG THEMSELVES, THE now five-strong team reaches the final destination, the village of Kokoda. It seems a miracle they made it without more serious mishap. They are relieved but too weary to celebrate. As they board a rickety 18-seater plane for the bumpy 25-minute flight to Port Moresby, the only transport link to the outside world for villages along the trail, their thoughts flash over the past 12 days. One team member lost to a sprained knee, another air-lifted out after suffering from chest pains and Travis unable to finish because of his leg. Then there are the drop-outs. But under them is their reward; the fierce terrain they conquered.

THREE DAYS LATER IT'S A DIFFERENT SORT OF LYNN who sits back in his office at Parliament House. Now he's dressed in a suit and his aggression on the trail has been replaced by a more reflective mood. Lynn says he is disappointed by the group's performance: they didn't develop the team synergy and leadership he had hoped for. He still supports the idea in principle but says a lack of time and money led to a rushed selection of kids, some of whom obviously shouldn't have gone. "I don't think one or two of them had any interest in the trip except making it themselves," he reflects. "They never stopped turning on each other and under normal circumstances that's gone by day three. Whenever they had spare time they lapsed into Nintendo mode, talking about computer games. I was trying to encourage them to think about their personal goals, how they can contribute to team work."

Was he too harsh on Michael? "I know I probably bordered on (going too far) but it had to be said because when people make a commitment to things they should give 110 per cent. If they don't then they shouldn't be there because they've deprived other kids who desperately wanted to come."

Back in Newcastle, Michael sits listlessly on the TV room couch in a new single-storey brick home supplied by the city's youth accommodation services housing. He was diagnosed with malaria two weeks after returning home and he's fevered, weak and his joints ache. He vomits regularly. Recalling Lynn's cutting words, he once again feels his self-esteem plunge. "Charlie's blunt, I understand that, but he was unnecessarily hard on me." Still, it seems to have had the desired effect. "I'm making it to the end next time," Michael says. "I'm going to prove it to myself." (Of those who didn't finish the trail, only Elizabeth said she didn't want to try again.)

On the other side of Newcastle, nestled back in her father and step-mother's Spears Point home with her younger step-brother and sister, April is also feeling a little worse for wear. She spent a night in hospital to treat a post-PNG bug and can't stop falling asleep every few hours. Her body is in turmoil after jumping from turbo boost back to a slow cruise. That first, terrifying night has faded to many mountains ago and, having mulled over the trip, she is starting to recall some of the hardest parts with fondness. Learning to build a stretcher to carry a team member across a river



was challenging and she now appreciates the pl of the diggers, after walking six hours in the dar sharing one torch and shivering the night away o the hillside when Travis hurt himself.

"It was a good lesson for us," she says. "It was amazing because I had no idea until then what t went through. Passing through the villages, I realised how we take things for granted, like but telephones and carpets." She quit smoking at the start of the trek but has started again since returning. Lynn warned her that she will fail the course if she lights up again so her Kokoda challenge shirt, a token of conquering the trail, is staying in the cupboard until she kicks the habit. But that hasn't taken the gloss off her achievement. "Now I feel that whatever you put in front of me can handle it." ■

Witness will air on Channel Seven at 9.30pm on Thursday.

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Michael Holt back home in youth accommodation services housing in Newcastle: "I'm making it to the end next time. I'm going to prove it to myself."