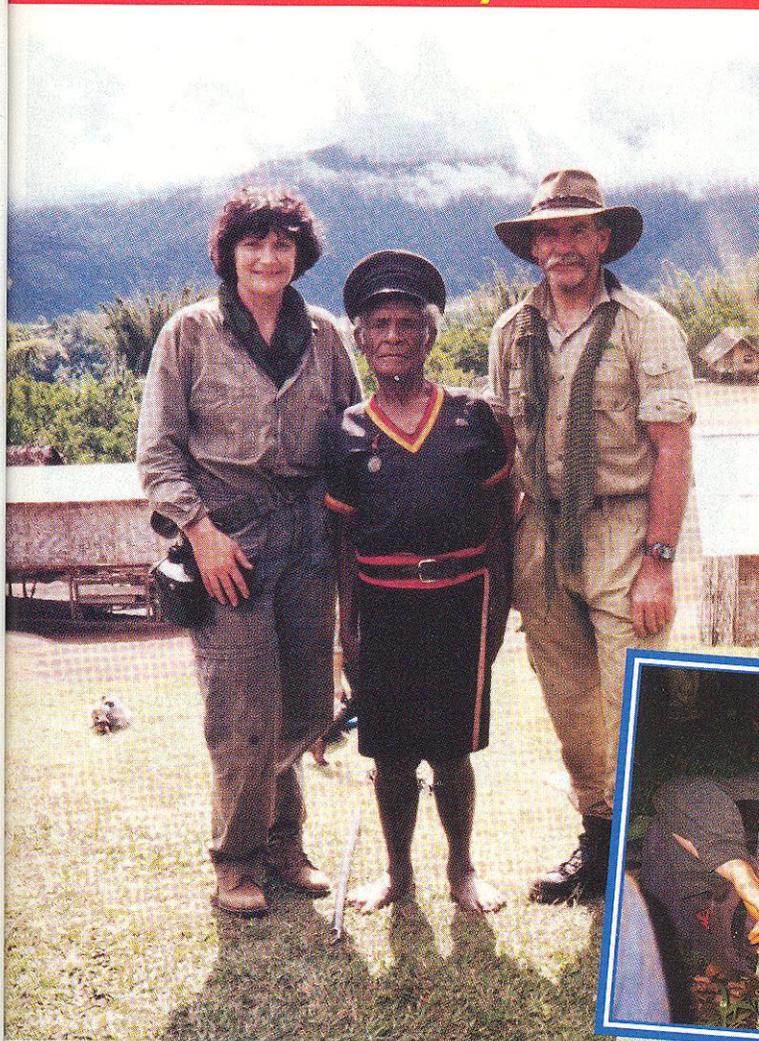


My Kokoda Trail trek

Kerrie Poyner, from Leumeah in Sydney, a 41-year-old mother of two teenage sons, knew little about the 1942 battle along New Guinea's Kokoda Trail, during which 625 Australians died as they pushed back Japanese forces. Then she decided to see for herself what our soldiers had endured in the jungle during this last-ditch defence, perhaps Australia's most crucial land battle of World War II.



For me, it all began when I heard a remarkable man, Charlie Lynn, a Vietnam veteran and a leading motivator, speak at a breakfast meeting about the young heroes of Kokoda. He told how our soldiers – some of them just 18 – were sent into battle against what was then one of the world's mightiest armies. Conditions under which they fought were terrible and the Australians were greatly outnumbered.

Charlie spoke with great passion, saying that it was disgraceful how Australians seemed to know more about American heroes such as Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone than the heroes of Kokoda. Later, I again met Charlie, who has taken many groups over the 100km trail so that they can experience at least

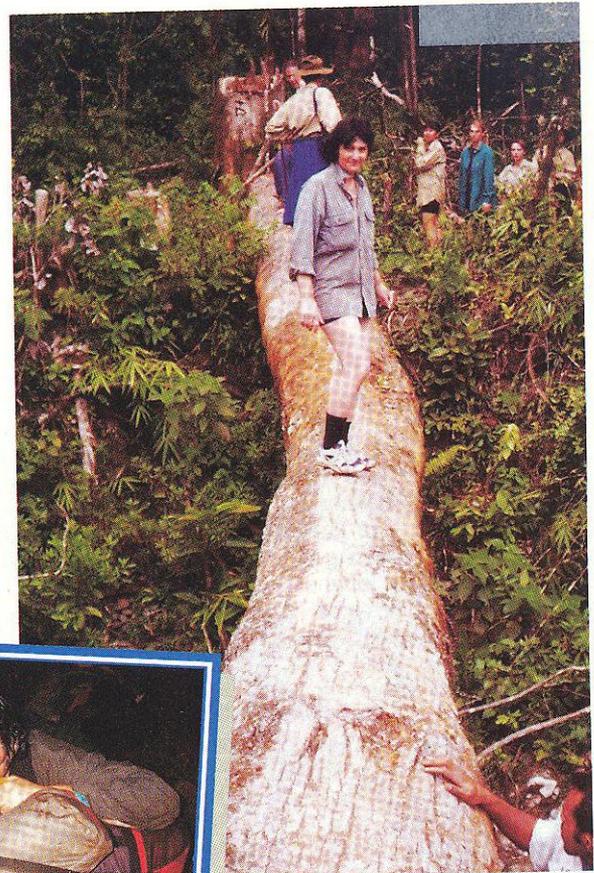
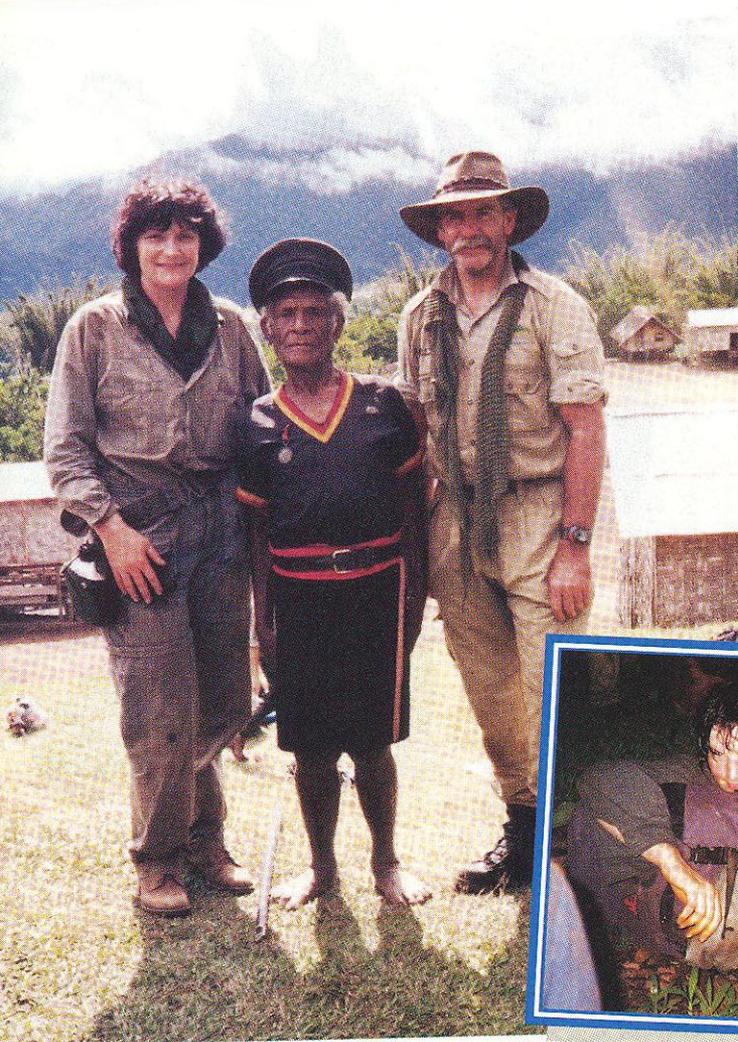
some of the dangers our young soldiers faced all those years ago. The treks also are designed to build leadership skills and "take you to the limit".

I have never shirked a challenge and I decided I had to walk the trail, even though Charlie had warned how arduous it was. But no warnings could have prepared me for what lay ahead. For 10 days, 13 of us, plus guides and leaders, with Charlie at the head, staggered up mountains and stumbled and slithered down steep muddy trails, often in pitch blackness. Sometimes we walked until 2am, and were trekking again after

just five hours sleep. We crossed narrow log bridges over raging torrents in the middle of the night, where one false step would have sent any of us spinning into the water below. We were always bone weary, our feet were blistered, there were tears and arguments, and our clothes were constantly soaked from sweat and the incessant rain.

On the first day, I fell six times and by nightfall I was asking myself why I was putting myself through this hell. Another woman who fell on that first day injured her knee and had to spend the night beside the trail before

One false step would have sent you spinning into the water



FROM FAR LEFT: Kerrie with Ovoru Indik, who helped our wounded soldiers, and Charlie Lynn; exhausted and soaked; and crossing a creek.

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being evacuated.

During the next four days, tensions rose as we crossed our own emotional and physical thresholds. I was surprised at the range of emotions. Some wanted to cut loose the weaker ones and were quite heartless in their criticism.

But on the sixth day, at a debriefing session – as we listened to one young woman unburden herself about her fears – we found a strong reliance on each other. From then on, the stronger ones began to help the weaker ones, just as the soldiers must have done all those years ago.

Many times on the trek I was frightened and once I

was petrified. This was when, in darkness, I had to leap over a part of the trail which had fallen away into the valley below.

One slip and I would have kept rolling down the hillside.

Finally, we reached Kokoda and at last I had time to reflect on what were the most momentous 10 days of my life.

It had been an awesome experience and taught me to be much more tolerant and understanding. I don't think I will ever fear anything again.

I will always be grateful for Charlie's wisdom, inspiration and leadership.

He regards all the trail, where so many of our men died, as holy ground. I never will forget his parting words: “If you can walk the Kokoda Trail, the rest of life is easy.”

One false step would have sent us spinning into the water below