

On the beaten track

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The ghosts of the diggers still wander Papua New Guinea's infamous Kokoda Track. And, as Marc Llewellyn reports, this tortuous jungle route can still make or break your spirit.

For Australian soldiers, walking the Kokoda Track was a nightmare prelude to the 1942 battles at Kokoda, a veteran told Marc Llewellyn who last week walked the track.

'Looking back, I can't help but think they were wonderful men. It's hard to believe that men could be so good. They were boys from out of the city and the bush. They were very proud and brave men. They did it because they had to do it. It wrings my heart. It makes you proud to be an Australian and be associated with them.'
John Sim, Signals Sergeant, 39th Militia Battalion.

Isurava. Colonel Ralph Honner. Blank looks. The diggers of the 39th militia. Brigade Hill. Never heard of them. So much for Australian education about its formative years.

The Kokoda Trail? Ah, now it's starting to mean something – except the name itself is an Americanism. The Kokoda Track, that 'bloody track'; its moody, jungly depths and grotesque, putrid hills are as unforgiving as ever.

Unlike Mr John Sim of the now-disbanded 39th Militia Battalion, my preparation for the 10-day trek involved step-up machines, stationary cycles and heart monitors. Sim and his mates ran in full kit, careered around obstacle courses and played cricket.

While they went to battle in the jungle with desert shirts and shorts (the lucky ones with half-a-blanket), I did the same with mozzie repellent and waterproof poncho.

Mr Sim, now 79, was a 25-year-old sergeant when he walked and fought the Track in 1942. The average age of the 480 raw-militiamen (nicknamed the Chocolate Soldiers) of the 39th was 18½.

"We were naturally nervous, but not to the point of despair. We were still being filled up with stories of short, fragile Japs with thick glasses and buck teeth – cartoon characters. We had been taught they weren't very much of an enemy. But they were just the opposite, as we found out to our cost."

Highly trained Japanese veterans were not on our itinerary, but we still had the Track, which

hour after hour, day after day would taunt us, spite us, twist us up and kick us when down.

At Ower's Corner, in the southern foothills of the Owen Stanley Range, the 39th had their last good feed at a plantation before the long 100 kilometre march along the track to meet the enemy at Kokoda. Here, the owner unnerved them by bringing out a grindstone to sharpen their bayonets.

At the same place we check gaiters, packs and muesli bars. Everyone is silent and already perspiring in the extreme humidity. The Track ahead is mud-brick red. Our leader is Australia's Indiana Jones; ex-major, professional motivator, aspiring politician and leader of Kokoda Treks, Mr Charlie Lynn.

"It's a relatively easy day" Lynn says. "But you rediscover the law of relativity."

We set off, 15 of us still tipsy after our Air Niugini flight, packs biting into our shoulders. Down we go and down, down, down we continue, our legs turning to jelly. Butterflies flutter tauntingly past our drenched and aching bodies. We ford the Goldie River, up to our thighs in running ice.

Then our first major obstacle, and it's the start of the Kokoda Shuffle: one foot in front of the other, up and up, knee to chest, I pull my dead weight up with a bamboo stick (my best friend, my rifle). I grapple and grasp for tree roots and clumps of spiky grass. My head pops up through the clouds, then down again for six more hours of grinding sheer hell to the top of Imita Ridge.

Down once more through thick, sticky jungle as the light peels away. A final long-winded haul over slippery river-bed boulders and we make it in time for dried pasta and sweaty bed.

COOOO-EEEEEE! No, it cannot be true. Still dark, but I get up anyway, just to please Charlie.

The jungle is denser now, folding in on us. Tangling its merciless, tripping roots around our blistered, crinkly-wet feet. Every up-hill lurch rips and jolts my body. I jab my stick's bayonet-sharp point into the slippery mud, just as John Sim did more than 50 years ago with his rifle and bayonet, heave and gasp, and drag myself a step further up.

It is never ending. After one mountain there is a second higher, steeper and more malevolent. We cross a land bridge, with sheer drops on either side, built by a malicious nature.

The near-vertical track for the next nine hours is washed out, leaving behind snaking roots of crawling trees, ridging and ditching, higgledy-piggledy. I gulp at my water bottle and pull away croaking and gasping for breath. The world is silent, foul, oppressive and tangling all over me.

I reach the top. It can't get worse. And then, in another cold-blooded test of my perseverance, it buckets with rain.

Downhill now and it's a race against the setting sun. Slipping, clunking, digging in my heels, sliding into a blackness which washes over me and leads me finally to exhausted sleep. Thirteen hours, unlucky for some.

"We didn't think at all, we were almost numb. You didn't talk, you didn't have the energy to talk to your mates. You'd be stumbling along just praying the track would come to an end every day so you could have a cup of tea and rest your weary head."

Day three, the hardest day of my life, sees us wading through swamps and shuffling across single log bridges above pounding streams. The jungle smells sweetly of decay. I pick up the heavy, rusty pull ring from a tin of bully beef thrown away by one of my digger mates more than half a century ago. Everything is wet, soaking, intrusive.

Then he does it, he really does it. Lynn calls that bastard a 'speed hump' – and we believe him, but the hill is so vertical its slimy bulk has tipped

itself over, ever so slightly. It is relentlessly destroying and a liar. We glimpse a halo of sky in the distance and down on our hands and knees in the sodden mud we pray to it, believing it to be the top. And each time we reach it, it shows its broken-toothed false-idol sneer and curves away ever upwards.

Liniment. Bandages. Second-skin blister packs. Sprains. Pulls. Agony. Exhaustion. Lunchtime is a war hospital. Then up to Brigade Hill, one foot after another, no jungle anymore, no ground, all is a blur, browns and greens, grinding, thumping, stabbing.

It was here one of the most decisive battles of the Kokoda campaign was fought. The 39th Militia had reached Kokoda and took it briefly from the Japanese. Heavily outnumbered, the 280 or so men of the 39th, along with reinforcements, then braved a fighting retreat along the Track. At Brigade Hill (or Butcher's Hill as it became known) 1,000 troops from the 21st Brigade dug in. Many lost their lives.

"We were in pretty bad shape, we'd lost so much weight, we were filthy, our clothers were rags and I suppose we stand to high heaven. We didn't have any boots left, the socks had to be cut off and the skin came with them."

The following day we roller-coaster-crawl for many hours between vine-choked trees and through tropical grasslands in the searing sun. The next, through moss forest towards the dried up plains of Myola Lakes, stopping to dig out scores of bullets from an Australian ammunition dump, blown up as the Japanese swept forward.

The moss forest envelopes us the next grueling day too. Then an interminable downhill clamber through the night sees us slipping and sliding past fairy-like fireflies and over florescent mosses and mushrooms which once illuminated the sprawling corpses of dead soldiers.

Here, at Templeton's Crossing, the Japanese continued their advance. From there, exhausted, their supply lines stretched, they were ordered to withdraw to fight for Guadalcanal.