

KOKODA

The New Campaign

Fifty years on, Australians are still drawn to the famous track. Battling through the jungle, Fiona Kennedy hears prayers for the fallen, curses for official neglect and a call to corporate adventure.

THE CLEARING ON BRIGADE HILL IS UNLIKE ANY OTHER ALONG the Kokoda Track. It is not jammed with starchy vegetables and banana trees to feed a hungry vegetarian village. Nor covered with a clutch of wooden high-set homes rattling with brightly dressed children. Instead, the hole in the Brigade Hill jungle is carpeted with lawn so neat it might have been recently mowed. The surface is uneven, marked by grave-sized hummocks.

A man with a back-o'-Bourke turn of phrase and a crooked grin is standing in the clearing, telling me and 29 other Australians that the otherwise silent place is, indeed, a cemetery. The man, Charlie Lynn, is convinced that up to 78 young men were buried here 52 years ago. The landowner and self-appointed gravekeeper, Siosi Lioumi, had told Lynn in 1992 that he buried them after a battle with Japanese troops five decades earlier. Lynn told the relevant Australian authorities who dispatched an army doctor to the isolated patch. The medic opened three "graves" and found a bayonet, some coins and the remains of a foot encased in a boot.

But the Australian Government discounted the mass grave theory, and Lynn remains furious. "To this day nothing has been done, there's absolutely zero interest in it," he says. "I think it's an absolute bloody disgrace that the Government and the bureaucrats just sit on their arses and totally ignore this."

To the 49-year-old former career soldier turned corporate leadership trainer, the official inaction is a slight against the dead men, their families, and all 7500 diggers who fought on the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea between July and November 1942. Moreover, he says, it belittles the spirit of the campaign, one of the most desperate but ultimately symbolic episodes of our post-colonial history.

Lynn is using the campaign as a lesson in leadership for corporate types whose most memorable encounters with Japanese are likely to be in CBD boardrooms and sushi bars. He is experimenting with the first RSL Leadership Trek – an attempt to make the gallantry and resourcefulness of Kokoda relevant to corporate Australia. The track, last post for 625 Australian soldiers and thousands of Japanese, has become a training ground for "civvies" with a future.

With the help of about a dozen Papua New Guinean guides – led



by Isaac Matama, the son of a "fuzzy wuzzy angel" – Lynn is marching the 30 of us along the narrow, root-strangled track in seven days. We are 10 women and 20 men, aged between 21 and 49. Besides myself, there are 10 company-sponsored professionals from organisations including law firm Blake Dawson Waldron, resource giant CRA, Prudential Assurance and News Ltd, five adventurers from Brisbane and Port Douglas, and two bon vivant partners in a Sydney law firm – who came on a whim and seem intent on giggling from go to whoa. Central to Lynn's plan are the other dozen people – young officers from the army, navy and airforce, partly sponsored by the RSL, who have studied the Kokoda campaign and



Doing it easy ... on the Kokoda nineties-style, without a bayonet charge in sight. Insets, from top: the writer with Isaac Matama, son of a 'fuzzy wuzzy angel'; children at Maguli; guide Robert Beriki, CRA's Barry Deane, Paul Howard and Carol Halsall, and Charlie Lynn.

troops. The officers are highly amused at my total lack of military precision in the packing department. Every time I reach into my backpack its contents spray like shrapnel over the ground. They dub this involuntary routine "the amazing exploding pack" and joke about how many platoons it takes to organise one journalist.

I first met Lynn in the late eighties when I worked for a running magazine and he organised the original Sydney-Melbourne ultramarathons. He's fought in Vietnam and held a NSW State title for running non-stop around a 400m track for 24 hours. To date he has crossed the Kokoda Track seven times and would rather sleep in a park than a hotel room. With this remarkable history in

give we non-camouflage wearers lessons in military history along the way.

Ostensibly Lynn has recruited me as the group scribe, but I quickly realise I'm also there to entertain the

mind I should have guessed that his concept of corporate leadership training would be painful. It was.

We begin at the northernmost point of the track (a term insisted on by PNG veterans I met on the eve of the trek, who claimed "trail" was an Americanism and its use wrongly implied US soldiers played a dominant role in the campaign), the village of Kokoda – 150km north-east of Port Moresby – and will exit at its southern end, Ower's Corner. It's little more than 100km long (with a slight detour for an overnight stay in Myola, the wartime supply depot which is now the only village with a commercial tourist lodge and a hot shower) and a fit office worker could cover our daily distances in an hour. Locals walk sections of it regularly, their heads piled high with bananas and their feet bare, and someone once ran it in 29 hours. But it soon becomes clear that triathlons and week-long bicycle tours I've completed in other lives cannot compare to clambering over razor-sharp ridges with shoulders wrenched by a 15kg pack and feet pickling in the brine of my never-dry boots.

The Owen Stanley Range is a chain of mountains whose glorious ruggedness becomes a curse when you're crossing them on foot – which is, bar aircraft, the only way to do it. When we set out from ▸

Kokoda village on a Sunday morning in July, I expected brutal terrain. I'd read of how exhausted soldiers struggled through mud – described by the late Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Honner as “a great boot-sucking porridge” – and up near-perpendicular slopes.

Viewed from below, the peaks disappear into clouds, soaring more than 2200 metres towards the heavens. Their shroud of brooding jungle is nourished – even in the “dry” season when we make our crossing – by drenching storms. It is hot, and it rains every day of our trip. As the water evaporates, the rainforest becomes a sauna.

The track is a greasy mess, often impossible to negotiate while we are vertical. Some days we seem to spend as much time tumbling and “tobogganing” on our backsides as walking. Every descent is dreaded because it leads to a breathless climb. And every ascent – the highest point, at Kokoda Gap, is 2190 metres – only holds the promise of another knee-jarring, toe-crunching descent. In between there are tentative stream crossings on mossy logs or hour-long wades through swamps. All of us, except perhaps the guides, develop some complaint as the days progress. We have prickly heat, swollen feet, blood blisters, squeaking knees, bad backs, aching shoulders, chafed groins, nausea and headaches. By the time we arrive at our daily campsite – a forest clearing or village – we're wet and stinking from sweat and mud, hungry and exhausted.

A wash in an icy stream – sometimes watched by curious villagers – is my evening treat. The Sydney lawyers, Russell Keddie and Scott Roulstone, are my favourite post-dinner (pasta, rice and dehydrated vegetables) companions – thanks to the bottles of cognac and bourbon they conjure up from the recesses of their designer packs. With their help I almost forget that my sleep and nerves will soon be shattered by a pre-dawn “coo-ee” from Lynn, and I'll don spongey socks and boots before starting the trudge all over again. If they keep pouring I might even stop whingeing about losing a contact lens and then breaking my spectacles.

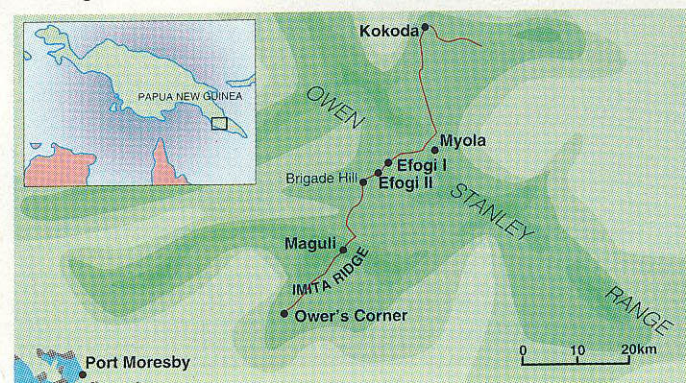
(Good company notwithstanding, I sleep alone. Except, admittedly, on the second night, when I share a tent – but certainly not a sleeping bag – with two male officers. They reassure me of their honourable intentions: “You're alright Fi, you're one of the boys.” Judging by the jokes they tell, they have mistaken me for one of the brethren. I laugh – in spite of myself – but am convinced the army immunises its boy members against political correctness, then administers annual boosters.)

To the officers' credit, they seem to complain much less than we civvies. The military women, Lesley Beshaw, Alison Westwood and Rachael Coulton, carry as much gear as their male colleagues – about 7kg more than my load – and never whimper. Their toughness reminds me that my discomfort can't

compare with the hardship of any of the raw young men who may have slept in the same jungle clearing five decades ago.

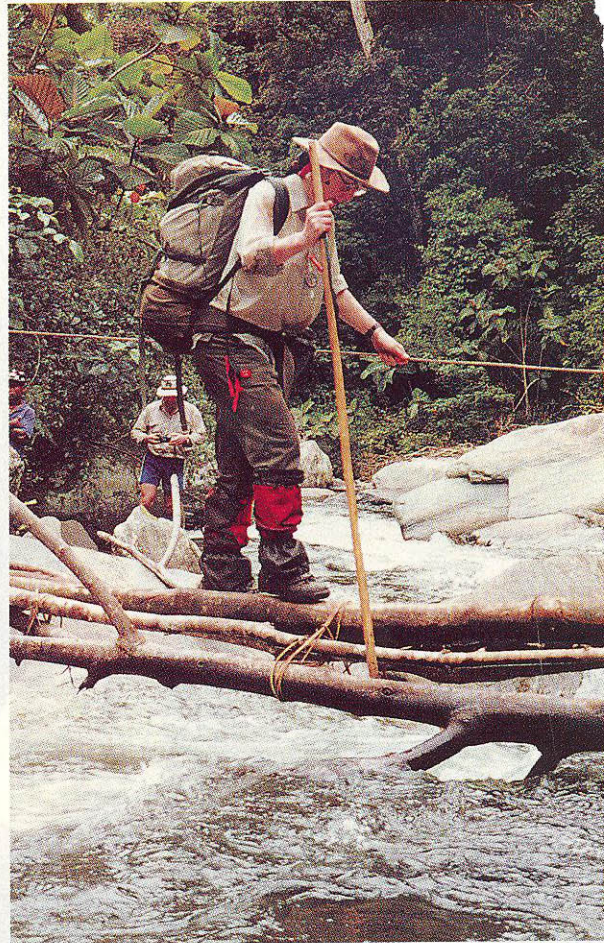
In August–September 1942 a mere 400 of them faced a Japanese force of 1800, which soon grew to 10,000 – men with a reputation for invincibility and a penchant for kamikaze bayonet charges. Unlike them, we don't face the constant threat of enemy fire. We don't take orders from inept commanders in Port Moresby and Brisbane. We don't have to walk and fight through a haze of malaria or dengue fever delirium. If we're injured, we don't face the prospect of a six-day journey to the nearest clinic on a pole-and-blanket stretcher borne by local carriers. The guides pitch our tents, carry some of our gear, and smile serenely and answer “half hour” whenever we ask the distance to the next stop.

Back then, many of the soldiers were teenagers and some had not been taught to fire weapons. Says Lynn: “Some of the guys had not even had time to say goodbye to their families in Sydney. They were put on a boat and told they were going to Queensland for future training.” The initial detachment

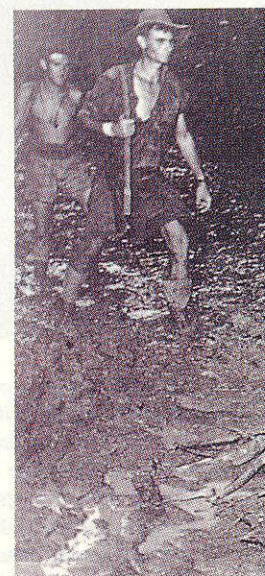


of B Company, 39th Battalion, comprised militiamen, derided by professionals as “chocolate soldiers” because they were expected to melt in the heat of battle. They set out from Port Moresby to follow a track hardly known outside the villages dotted along it. They were supposed to secure Kokoda, an administrative centre north of the Owen Stanley Range, from where it was thought they could guard an airbase planned for nearby Dobudura.

Their mission was to stop Japanese jungle fighters crossing the range from the north and penetrating strategically crucial Port Moresby – a hop across Torres Strait from mainland Australia. B Company had recently received an “F” grading for combat efficiency. As Peter Brune says in his book, *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes*, the vanguard for “the direct defence of the last fortress



Top: a test of grit for Carol Halsall. Above: the back door route to Port Moresby. Right: how it was in 1942.



before the Australian mainland” was “apparently amongst the least trained, worst equipped and most inexpertly led forces in the entire Australian Army”.

Yet somehow they repelled the Japanese before they could conquer Imbua Ridge, 42km north-east of Moresby. And when the exhausted diggers reclaimed Kokoda on November 2, 1942 – a little more than four months after it was captured by the Japanese – they cemented the first defeat of the Japanese army in World War II. It was also Aus-

tralia's first victory on home territory, as New Guinea then was.

Combat and disease took 625 Australian lives. The loss would have been so much greater without the help of the local people, the "fuzzy wuzzy angels". They also suffered and died, carrying supplies and spiriting the injured to safety. Australian schoolchildren learn of their invaluable place in our history. The children probably assume, as I did, that they were justly compensated – if not by their grandparents' generation, then by their parents'.

I was acutely embarrassed to hear from some of the veteran "angels" that they were awaiting the fulfilment of a promise made 53 years ago. Matama Kekeve says he was 18 when Bet Kienzle, a plantation owner and captain in the Australian and New Guinea Administrative Unit with a bear-like build, came into his village of Kagi. Kienzle "told us, you help us here and we pay you later", Kekeve recalls. He helped troops on the Kokoda Track and later at Buna, the beach north-east of Kokoda which became a grim battlefield after the range campaign. No pay arrived.

Likewise Omi Aburi, Sie Goberi and Obi Belive, now living in a village called Efogi II (downhill from Efogi I) say they have been fighting for compensation for the past 10 years. There's a warranted feeling of

calls a meeting to publicise the guides' hunch, saying: "Rascals are after two things – women and money. So we'll send the women on ahead with the money." (Given that he has been preselected as a Liberal candidate for a western Sydney federal seat, he may have to re-evaluate his taste in jokes.) Our exit is delayed when three members of our party elect to hire porters. There are plenty of strapping young men in Efogi II, but they're reluctant to take to the track when rascals are said to be afoot.

It is a false alarm. The "rascals" are villagers quietly making their way to Port Moresby, oblivious to the stir they have

footstep that I made was a prayer to those fallen and to their mothers", Deane says. "It was a piece of cake after that."

For Lynn, Brigade Hill is a small but important part of the history of Kokoda, which is in turn "just symbolic of all the campaigns". "There are plenty of others," he says. "Australians were the first to ever defeat Rommel. Rommel was deemed to be one of the best in the German army at a time when it was an invincible military machine. It was again Australians who were the first to defeat the Japanese. And we've got a fine record in Korea and Vietnam. When we compare Australia to other countries in the

AT FIRST, BARRY DEANE, 46, STRUGGLED AND SWORE. THEN, AFTER BRIGADE HILL, 'EVERY FOOTSTEP I MADE WAS A PRAYER TO THOSE FALLEN AND TO THEIR MOTHERS.'

caused. We learn this from a band of Australians hiking in the opposite, south-to-north direction. (Concern about rascals, however, can be justified. The guides later identify one diamond-clear stream – from which we drink safely – in which they recently found the body of a rascal, apparently killed in an internecine battle.) The other Australians have teamed up with a Japanese trekker who started the journey on his own. He does not seem interested in the gallant history of Japanese on the track, saying those events were "for my father's generation".

At the Brigade Hill clearing Lynn paints profiles of two of his leadership models, Captains Claude Nye and "Lefty" Langridge. Nye was a 24-year-old veteran of the Middle East who had recently married when, on September 8, 1942, he was shot on Brigade Hill – thus named because it was a temporary headquarters for the 21st Brigade. He bled to death after ordering his men to fight on without trying to save him. During the same battle Langridge handed his dog tags and pay book to a friend before perishing at the head of an ill-fated attack. The track would be littered with such tales of sacrifice and initiative – if they could be recalled. As Barry Deane, CRA's chief consultant on recruitment and executive training,

later says: "The whole track is a graveyard." Deane, 46, is one of the oldest trekkers and seemingly the least likely to complete the march intact. A childhood bout of late-diagnosed tuberculosis left him with permanent scarring on the lungs, he has back problems, and he's done a minimum of training. Until Brigade Hill he was struggling to lift his feet and cursing Charlie Lynn for dragging him on this lunatic enterprise. But after Brigade Hill and Lynn's passionate claim about the unmarked graves, "every

ultimate test of leadership and teamwork, were really second to none.

"Gallipoli was the baptism of fire of the Australian army, and it created Anzac Day. That's fine, but Gallipoli was somebody else's war in a foreign country. Kokoda was an Australian war in Australian territory.

"I think the power of this is in the study of leadership from an Australian perspective. Australian corporations tend to take leadership theory that's been produced in America or the UK, but my experience with corporations is, really, they waste a lot of money." Most leadership training is "bullshit", he adds. Corporate money would be better spent on studying Australians whose deeds "were not involving profit or loss – but involving their own lives".

Two days after Brigade Hill we made a frantic scramble up the last hill of the Kokoda Track – which is etched in my mind as the steepest, slimiest and most frustrating – and jogged triumphantly towards the road at Ower's Corner. It occurred to me then that 30 people from largely disparate backgrounds had maintained their composure remarkably well in trying circumstances for seven days. There were no debilitating injuries, only one trekker showed a weakness for tantrums, and I saw no signs of us sinking into social disorder. Many people were clearly – I think justifiably – pleased with their own achievements.

Deane told me that until this walk, he pictured fallen soldiers as old men, people of his father's generation. I had thought of wrinkled hands clutching tables in an RSL club as patrons rose to say "Lest We Forget". On the way from Ower's Corner to the Port Moresby Travelodge we stopped at Bomana War Cemetery and read the inscriptions on the neat headstones that Brigade Hill may never have. Some there had died young enough to be Deane's sons. No matter how good their leadership skills, they never did get to display them to their parents. □



betrayal among these men, shaming me over my country's dishonour.

After spending the fourth night on the track in Efogi II headman Aburi's house, we start the ascent to Brigade Hill in a subdued mood. The guides, usually unflappable, are nervous about a group of young men who camped nearby last night and are on the track ahead of us. They suspect they are "rascals", ruthless bandits who target foreigners for their money and goods. Perhaps they are planning to ambush us. Lynn