

KOKODA TRACK – Papua New Guinea

23rd October - 1st November, 2007

Kokoda to Owers' Corner – 96.4km

'Lynette's Thoughts'

Firstly let me say, the Kokoda Track was an *awesome* experience in the full sense of the word. It was an adventure as much about its history and wilderness, as it was a personal journey; my father fought for Australia in the WW2 Milne Bay campaign (S.E. tip of PNG). Being a seasoned bushwalker and lover of the outdoors, having completed an Outward Bound expedition in my earlier years and countless similar pursuits since; this expedition was tough, *bloody tough*; rough, steep and at times even treacherousI've never encountered so much mud and sweat and Ohhh!, the heat and humidity! The Owen Stanley Range was to hold much in store for us!

Each morning I'd be up around 4:30-5:00am to sort and re-pack my pack. Jeanette, my travelling companion and I, would drag ourselves into damp and increasingly filthy and smelly clothes and, more often than not, wet socks and boots. We'd begin the day with a hearty breakfast of porridge and a Malaria tablet, then spread a good lathering of sunscreen on any exposed skin, fill our water bottles and finally, find our hats; (Where *did* I put my damned hat?) Every 2 days I'd celebrate with dry socks which would inevitably be wet within a few hours after numerous creek crossings; back and forth, slowly working our way along the sometimes unidentifiable track.

The rest of our group, including my brother Brian, and his mate Michael, would be on the track around 6:30am. Sometimes a sleep-in would allow a 7am start. Steve, our local head porter would make the call, "Are we ready?" We'd yell in unison.... "Yes", then he'd yell, "Where's the road?", we'd all yell, "NO ROADS" (the name of our expedition company) and once again we'd be on our way, and keep going with a couple of breaks until about 3pm long days, ever climbing (calf muscle work-outs) and descending (knee torture). It was a matter of intense concentration to negotiate the tangled network of tree roots, cross many fast flowing rivers, walk through small rocky creeks and trudge the least muddy route. Sometimes you just couldn't be bothered so you'd just trudge straight through the middle. Our 3 longest days were 9.5 hours. I have to say that my faithful walking stick was an absolutely crucial piece of equipment; it saved me numerous times and got me out of some 'dicey' situations.

The daily temperature varied greatly, depending on where we were. The first 3 nights were very cold, close to 0 deg; the coldest being on Mt. Bellamy, (2,190mt - approx. height of Mt. Kosciusko), then through the low Kunai Grasslands with the sweltering and oppressive heat necessitating us to drink 3-4 litres of water a day.

But the Track was achievable, only because of all the training I had put in beforehand; a program at the local gym, riding my bike 13km return to school 3 days a week 21-Sep-10 across hills, regularly walking 5km (our dog gave up and refused to come), a 1.5km weekly swim and of course the obligatory training at the Kokoda Memorial

1,000 steps in Upper Ferntree Gully in the Dandenong Ranges (twice a week, up and down the steps 3 times).

The variety of exercise was crucial to my training regime, and when I was on the Track, I was so thankful I'd stuck to it! A bonus was my weight loss of 9.5kg which began when my training started late in July, until finally tapering off by the end of November.

Despite the innumerable physical challenges, I never felt any regret or reason why the Track should defeat me - 8 days is a long time to be away in the wilds of that reckless tangle of relentless jungle. My main concern was the possibility of an injury that would not allow me to complete what I had already decided would otherwise be a 'fait accompli'.

The weather is rarely on your side in PNG. It's terminally hot, humid and wet, and so it was for our expedition along the Track. Our leaders said they had never walked a wetter track. It rained most afternoons or evenings....it poured....this set the scene for slippery and muddy days, particularly in the mornings, until the sun seeped through the blanket of trees overhead to somewhat dry the quagmire around the edges. This daily experience was for the duration of our trek.

Surprisingly, despite the hardships, I was deliriously content ... the scenery was stunning, the company was vibrant and there was always something to marvel at. At times I was alone with just my thoughts and the wonderful vision of my surroundings. Mostly though, I enjoyed the company of my porter, Jombie GEWAR. He was just 17yrs, yet he was walking the Track for the 21st time. What a guy! What a body! So strong.....and always with such a wonderful smile! Jombie had run in the 24hr Kokoda Challenge race last year, but sadly had to retire hurt, half way. Jeanette's porter, Gibson, had run 2nd, in 20 hours – a feat I cannot imagine. However did they run through the night and not injure themselves seriously?

My 17 trekking companions, our leader Dave, and 24 porters made a great team. Despite our backgrounds and disparate ages (20-55 yrs.), everyone found a common core. We all had a variety of reasons for being there.

There were of course many memorable moments.....such as the Alola Village Cock, crowing at 1:35am and every 1/2hr afterwards until sunrise, encouraging its feathered neighbours up and down the valley in a competition..... Chicken Soup never sounded so tempting! There were numerous incidents of slipping and sliding down muddy tracks at great knots (usually to the cheers of onlookers) and the incident when Michael sliced his knee open to the bone on one of the many slippery mud covered rocks, - his determination not to be evacuated, but to complete his journey (all healed and in good shape now), was a time of concern for us all.

Everything on the Track seemed to cost 5 Kina (equivalent to AUD\$2); the cans of Coke & Solo, the plates of fresh fruit and fried sweet potato supplied by the villagers – how delighted we were to avail ourselves of these welcome treats. Tim (*Snr's*) military knowledge and fabulous stories, especially of his time as Publican in Burketown, Qld.,

which he treated us to most evenings, bringing us to tears of laughter, were enthralling, all after a fabulous gastronomic meal cooked by our wonderful porters.

I enjoyed the fresh 'bush showers' in the villages, greetings from the illuminated faces of the little village children, especially when we brought out gifts from deep inside our packs, pencils, sharpeners, rubbers, balloons, liquid bubbles, inflatable balls, even little Japanese fans (I wonder if the children even noticed the painted Geishas) and of course everything that comes with being one of only 7 women in the company of 35 blokes on a camping trip!

Much of the credit goes to our Trek Leader (MFB Fireman), David "Yeh, Yeh" Collins (his 'catch cry') who made it his mission to enrich our lives with the history and culture of Kokoda. Dave imbued us with a sense of team spirit and the lore of the Kokoda spirit:

"Mateship; Sacrifice; Courage and Endurance".

Even if we faltered as the misery metres were ticking by and the grizzle sticks were out, Dave kept us motivated. I wonder how many extra kilometres he walked as he repeatedly passed us up and down the trekking line, checking how everyone was managing. A man of many good stories and such a good sense of humour too. Of course there can never be enough praise for the kindness and humility of our personal porters. They were local PNG guys who all came from the village of Kagi (they along with all the villagers on the Kokoda Track are Koiari people, and are 7th Day Adventists). Each one of them regarded our safety as a matter of honour. They lugged our packs with never a complaint and were always there to lend a hand, guiding us safely across the mountains and over raging torrents. They would put our tents up and down, and Jombie even cut fern fronds to lie as carpet at our tent door to cover the muddy ground.

So many times Jombie lent a helping hand when the ground was slippery or river crossings a bit hair-raising. Often words were not exchanged, they didn't need to be, and Jombie just knew when to help. The porters, some of whom are sons and grandsons of their hallowed forebears, continue to honour the legacy of those 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' who cared for our soldiers in WW2, 1942.

One of the highlights of our trip was meeting one of the last 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' in the village of Nadoori. He was 102 yrs old. His 40 year old son told us about his father and some of the many stories of the Kokoda Campaign. I personally thanked him on behalf of my father, for the wonderful help they had given him and all of our Australian soldiers. When I was a teenager, I remember my father telling me some wonderful stories. I was so impressed with the respect he and the other soldiers had for them. He also said that 'we' would never have beaten the Japanese without the care and help of the 'Fuzzy Wuzzies'.

Then there were all those porters who cheerfully charged ahead of us to set up our campsites, prepare meals and make sure there was always hot water for a cup of tea or freshly ground plunger coffee, and who faithfully carted everything, food, tents,

cooking equipment and other supplies. Honestly, some of the porters took such 'death defying' shortcuts, either straight down or up a cliff-face with full pack, and they were so sure-footed....if I hadn't seen them do it, I would never have believed it!

This insight into the hardships of the WW2 Kokoda Campaign (1942), about which I learned much, has found a place in my soul. It is difficult to believe those untrained soldiers from the 39th Battalion were able to survive for so long with so little it is truly a testimony to the human spirit which should be celebrated.

In comparison to 'Those Ragged Bloody Heroes' of the 39th Battalion (a book by the same name), we were travelling in 5 star comfort!

A few tears were shed along the track, especially at the memorial sites, but the most moving moment for me was when our Aussie trekking group sang 'Advance Australia Fair' and in return, the porters sang the PNG National Anthem for us at Imita Ridge. The Japanese were forced back and never reached this ridge on the Track. Our porters were softly spoken men who were naturally gifted with beautiful singing voices.

And so I arrived, 8 days and 96.4km later at Owers' Corner, mostly unscathed, (a sore rib after a tumble on a slippery root near the base of the 'Golden Staircase'.....and without one blister), understanding some more Pidgin English (this was my 3rd visit to PNG), stronger in spirit and richer for the knowledge gained about the ordeals our soldiers and the wonderful 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' had endured during the battle for the Kokoda Track in WW2, 1942.

It seems very strange being back in the big smoke of Melbourne. All too often I find myself pining for that jungle and the camaraderie of our trekking group. I feel great pride in my achievement, not bad for a woman (wife & mum) who celebrated her 53rd birthday on the Track at Isurava.

On our return, I read that it had been the wettest weather in PNG for 100 years. Just 12 days later, Cyclone Guba struck, devastating Oro Province where the Kokoda Track is situated. More than 160 people died and thousands more were made homeless. The expedition following ours took 8 days to reach Kagi (our porters' village) which is only half way along the track. They could go no further because the rivers and creeks had become raging torrents and the log bridges had been totally washed away. They were evacuated by aircraft to Port Moresby.

I guess luck was on our side this time!

©

Lynette Giddings

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AUSTRALIA

(See Photos below).....

Photos:

(Above L) Lynette & Brian (my brother) @ Owers' Corner after 96.4km 5-May-11

(Above R) Lynette and trekking party at the beginning of the long climb heading up to Mt. Bellamy.

(Below L) Lynette crossing Eora Creek with help from Jombie.

(Below R) Our Trekking group taking a refreshing & well earned dip.

