

KOKODA

Kokoda Track Trek Notes by Justin Kibell – 25th September to 3rd October 2007

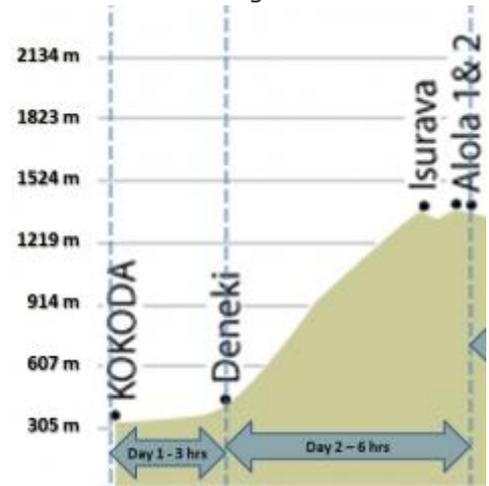
Well I did it! I have walked the Kokoda Track from Kokoda to Ower's Corner and survived. Thanks to the wonderful porters and No Roads Expeditions guides I made it without injury and thoroughly enjoyed my experience, even the hills! This trek diary will begin as day one when we set off walking and does not include the travel to PNG and the time at our hotel in Port Moresby.

Day 1: Tue 25 Sep 07

Kokoda to Deniki

With a group of 42 trekkers and 60 porters the logistics of flying all people to Kokoda was a challenge. At 7:30 am we were all packed and waiting in the lobby of the Hotel ready to head off when instructed. Over the next five hours three buses took all the trekkers to the airport for the flight out.

The bus trip was quick taking us to a smaller part of the main airport where a Twin Otter plane was waiting for us. I was on bus two which meant I was in the second group to head over to Kokoda. At 11:00am we arrived and jumped aboard. Each person had a window seat and we all gazed out at the lush jungle tree-tops and valleys as we flew out from the airport, across the plains and up into the Owen Stanley Ranges through the Kokoda Gap and down to Kokoda Airport.



The entire flight was around 35 minutes and at some stages you fly very close to the trees as you wind your way through the valleys. Our flight was great and the views amazing. The weather was kind to us allowing some views of the various villages we were soon to walk through. Thinking to myself I wondered which day it would be when we would walk through each village that I saw. The pilots seemed experienced and when we came to the grass runway airport at Kokoda we held on tight. No bumps, great landing.

As soon as I stepped out I noticed the heat and humidity. Not much different to Port Moresby but I knew I had arrived and it was going to be wet and sticky. Thunderstorm clouds could be seen in the distance and over the Kokoda Valley, nice clear blue sky allowing the sun to beat down on us all. Ever aware I needed to watch my exposure to the sun my floppy hat was on straight away. The malaria tablets warn about an increased risk of sunburn due to the tablets.

The first group of trekkers on flight one was already here and had mingled with the porters for some time. The airport is really only two huts and a sign. No toilets or anything. Some locals had come over to find out who had arrived and some jumped back on the plane to head back to Port Moresby. The first thing I noticed about the porters was that they were all shorter than me. I felt a little odd being taller and solid built. Most were wearing a T-shirt and shorts and a lot didn't have boots. They looked happy to see us and some spoke a little English when saying hello. I think everyone was a bit shy so I set about preparing my pack, camera and taking a nervous leak in the nearby rubber trees.

I did think to myself that this place is full of history and if I was standing here during the war I would have been on very strategic ground, probably in a fire-fight and right in the thick of it. The views up and down the valley were amazing and the hills around did look steep! I guess we asked for it.

The head guide Josh decided we should head off to the village and wait there for the last plane. So the first and second groups and most of the porters took off. Packs on for the first time, boots ready and we were off. I didn't want to lead and didn't want to be last. Luckily the first mob all spread out in a horizontal line across the width of the airstrip so we all lead. The short trip was from the air-strip to the village about 30 minutes away. Pack feels ok!



This was a hot walk and I started feeling it. I should say now that I arrived in PNG with a horrible head cold sporting buckets of mucus, headaches, sneezing and coughing and a general "feeling crap" feel to round me off. I had held my head high and thought positively to plough through without it worrying me, but alas, it was with me to stay and made walking in hot weather very tough. Time will tell how I go I guess.

Kokoda Village is not so huge from what I could see. The plane trip circled around to the airport and we could see lots of huts and so on, but the number of people and houses surprised me. I thought there might be quite a big settlement but it seems very spread out across the valley. The Kokoda Memorial was

our first stop and we all looked forward to a drink and time to take photos etc. awaiting the last plane load of trekkers so we could all be one group.

The Kokoda Memorial museum was very interesting and included a number of stories, photographs and weapons on shelves. I am hopeless when it comes to remembering our diggers and I shed a tear or two quietly. It is just so amazing what they did and the enormous loss and suffering on both sides still gets me now writing this. Outside in a grass parade ground sized area three flag-poles stand along side three memorial cairns.



These cairns represent each significant force that was involved being the Australians, the local PNG Fuzzy Wuzzy Angles and the Japanese soldiers. Each memorial was low key but significant in its simplicity. I took some photos but felt uncomfortable and a bit overwhelmed (combination of feeling ill, emotional and hot I think).

Now the wait for the third group was only a few hours but it seemed like ages. Many of us went up the road to a villagers house who had a water tap piped to his property and we filled our water bladders etc.. I was

very thirsty and looked forward to a good drink. Purifying all our water was easy but a pain waiting for it to be ready, around 30mins per litre. I filled my 4 litres and waited.

Peter Miller arrived with the third group who were warmly welcomed. A well structured history lesson on the times leading up until the Kokoda campaign and then a run-down on the campaign at Kokoda was presented by Peter and we all listened. Luckily I had read a number of history books and much of what Peter said made sense but it was great to hear someone else explain things.

Our next 3 hours or so were laid out in front of us. Walk up through the Kokoda plantations and straight up the nearby hill to Deniki which is about half way up. The walk is easy compared with what is to come and we should be at Deniki by about late afternoon. On the way several trekkers had first aid supplies to hand out at the Kokoda District Hospital and items such as pyjamas and footies for the locals. The look on the kids faces was worth the weight of the items in the packs.

Off we trekked up through the plantations in single file. The group spread out pretty quickly with no rush but eager trekkers were making a bee-line for Deniki. The porters had taken off a little earlier to secure the camp site and begin setting up. The walk was punctuated by 2-3 log crossings and the temperature seemed very hot. Walking along the flatter part was in the sun and then later up the hill under the cover of the canopy.

Hoi was the first village we passed through and it was a welcome sight. Fresh pineapple, bananas, Solo and Coke cans were on offer for 5 Kina each. The fruit was so lovely and sweet and we all bought platters to chew through. I must say the rest was great even though we had barely started. My cold and flu had now made me feel like I was over-heating and the coughing and constant running nose made life a bit crappy, but not enough to dampen my enthusiasm. The villages are all so friendly and greeted us with warm smiles and waves at every opportunity.



Ok, now we started to experience the Kokoda we all came for. The first hill! Up to Deniki the path snaked up through thicker undergrowth into towering trees with massive canopies. The ground became muddy, rocky in parts and the roots began to be a problem making it hard to just wander without tripping. The hill certainly made everyone start to need regular rest breaks, look hot and bothered, look bugged, or all of above. I found the going tough like most people and made it to the camp-site around 45 minutes later from Hoi.

The group had spread out across the track with some slower members of the group coming in an hour later. The tents were all setup and huddled on a small grassed area looking out over the valley. They looked very like the aliens eggs in the film *Alien*. A large guest-house hut was perched on the edge of the hill looking out over the valley with awesome views. Most of the porters camped in the hut overnight whilst we all piled into the tents, two per tent.

The first order of business when you arrived was to dump your pack, change into your camp shoes (usually crocs or thongs) and head off to find the water to refill and wash. This was a 50m walk down a slippery track to a pipe sticking out of the hill with lovely fresh cold water streaming out. After a while the track became very slippery with all the traffic but nothing compared with what was to come!!

Warm popcorn was made available to all that arrived. The popcorn was covered in salt and Cajun spices and so yummy warm and salty. This salt intake was needed by most as sweating causes a salt and mineral loss.



I took some photos of the site, the views and camp life. Most people spent time adjusting themselves to camp life, hanging up clothes, just existing in uncomfortable hot and steamy conditions, wearing wet clothes etc.. Dinner was being prepared by the porters and smelt yummy. Peter and Josh our guides were busy briefing porters about various things and answering lots of questions from the trekkers and myself. The loo was a pit toilet and just over the edge looking out over the valley, a room with a view, but smelly.

Dinner was served at dusk and consisted of curried sausages, mash potatoes and carrot etc.. all in a bowl. We had Tim Tams after dinner and fruit. After dinner washing up and bed was next. I stayed with Symon after initially bunking in with Dominic. Dom felt awful so we left him to himself and I jumped tents. With an early start in the morning required most went to bed before 9pm. The jungle noises were new and it was still warm indeed. I used my sleeping bag but only just as I always sleep hot anyway. It rained overnight and kept everyone's clothes who hung them up to dry nice and moist for the morning.

I fell asleep listening to the porters chatting and the jungle bugs singing wondering what tomorrow would be like and how I would go. I was worried a bit now given my efforts today and how hard I found it with my cold and flu. Sleep was easy as I was tired.

Day 2: Wed 26 Sep 07

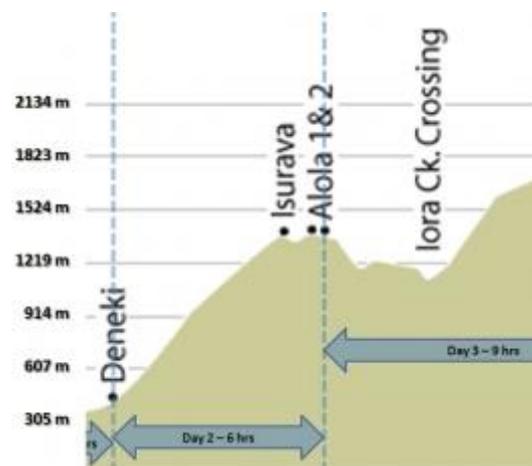
Deniki to Alola

Today will be our first full day of trekking and I am excited. It rained all night and everything is pretty soggy outside and a thick fog has rolled in. My gear stayed dry which is great and my tent didn't leak or anything. Most people had started waking around 5am with the temperature rising along with the excitement. The aim was to be walking by 7am in daylight and to get cracking as there is a fair walk to complete today.

The porters were up already and had prepared some breaky for those who had time. Lots of cereals, porridge and fruit etc.. Not knowing what to do exactly I thought I would knock off some easy tasks like refilling my water bottles. The track last night was starting to get slippery, but now after rain last night it is very slippery. A number of others had the same idea and followed me down to the water pipe and we all filled our various blue, orange and clear coloured water bladders and bottles. Some porters were already there having a quick wash jumping in and out of the cold water laughing at each other.

Instructions were to pack your gear up ASAP so the porters could rip down our tents and pack their gear up. For me this was rolling up my sleeping mat, stuffing my sleeping bag, placing my clothes into the water-proof stuff sacks, putting my days trek clothing on and putting my shoes and gaiters on. Now the pack and myself were free from the tent and it was quickly taken apart and packed by smiling porters.

Peter Miller had organised all the porters into a large circle so we could all be introduced and shake hands with each and everyone of them. This was great and the variety of names was amazing. A chance to say hi was also welcomed as yesterday we were all in a rush. After 60 odd handshakes later, time to don the pack and get ready for the next segment of our journey but not before a quick history lesson on the campaign for this segment from Deniki to Alola which also included Isurava.





Now today we will climb around 500m in elevation across many kilometres and travel along this side of a valley through Isurava Village and the battle site along to Alola Village which is slightly down from the highest point today of around 1420m. This part of the track is mainly uphill and has several false peaks (peaks which lead to more downhill and then uphill grrr). The terrain will be rainforest with lots of muddy track as before and in some spots the choko gardens open up the canopy to the hot sun. As with most of the track numerous water crossings, mainly logs over creeks are expected.

My condition was much the same as yesterday with a headache, runny nose, deep chesty cough and trouble breathing when exercising. With a positive mental attitude I loaded up my pack and prepared to leave with everyone else, not in the front but not at the back. With the fog all around us it was quite spooky and a great start to the adventure today. Everyone was in high spirits and we took off in single file past the water pipe and into the hills.



The first thing that hit me was how much more muddier the track was today with the rain. The tree roots were all over the track so stepping over things became a constant mental challenge. Don't forget or your down on your butt. The walking poles I brought were ace and really gave me that extra stability I needed. Going up hills is hard enough let alone with a pack and now in the rain on slippery ground. The poles are essential and by now just about every trekker had them, either purpose built from Australia or created by the porters who simply made them along the track using small trees or branches.

The next 4 hours of trekking was hard slogging up very long and steep sections of track. The track wound its way around a number of valleys, past waterfalls, over creeks and up steep steps made from natural rock formations or tree roots. The group began to spread out again with some people 20-40mins behind where I was which was in the middle group. I was very unhappy with myself for being sick but realising this wouldn't help I plugged away at the hills. They were challenging and relentless. Note: Later on I realised they were actually easy here!!



Choko fields are always in open areas where there are less trees with only massive ones left. The vines cover the ground looking almost like grass from a distance. These areas are hot and steamy and whilst I loved the scenery, I loathed the extra heat from the sun. Hat on. Some of the sections had very steep drop-off areas so keeping tabs on who was in front and behind you was a smart idea. Falling over an edge would be a worry as you would go a fair distance and then you would have to come back up again!

Isurava Village is the first village we came into after walking up a steep muddy track with grass in the mud making it very slippery. The village just appears and you are in it. No fences, no signs, just young kids playing and adults watching on. The huts are all made from wood and on stilts. The ground in the village was all dirt with no grass. Maybe it is a way to prevent having to mow? I was hoping this was actually Isurava but alas it was only the village some distance before the battle site.



A short stop to empty water from my boots, have something to eat, sit and relax was next. Most of the middle group had found a shelter and we plonked down for 20 mins. I was bugged and wondering if I

would make the end. Funny how you doubt yourself and with all the time to think during the walk I started to do this. Looking around the group many were showing signs like myself that they were doing it hard also which made me feel better in a selfish way.

Gaiters are a must in my opinion. Not to prevent scratches from bushes or anything, but to simply keep mud and stones out of your boots. I had the short style which was fine and recommended as I believe the full height ones get way to hot. I emptied my boots to find a lot of water (mostly sweat) pour out. Nice to free the feet for a while also. Heaps of mud on my boots which adds weight but par for the course along the Kokoda Track.

It was still raining on and off as we walked along under the shelter of the massive rainforest trees. The rain was nice on my head and body and I enjoyed the cool sensation it brought. I covered my pack with my pack-cover and that seems to have done the job well. No leaks. Wearing a poncho would be way to hot and steamy so mine stayed in the pack for later. Having attached a water bottle to the side of my pack and also my Crocs I noticed my pack cover struggled to fit over them all and tighten. Test this with yours before coming over as you may choose to get a larger one instead.

I arrived at the Isurava battle site bursting out from the fog into a more open area where a few huts and terraced grassed areas guided us down to the memorial. I was tired and hungry, pretty much ready for a break again as the last few kilometres were relatively flat but had some nasty steep up and down sections in gully's. The battle site is quite a small area. Hard to tell exactly how big in amongst the fog which was thick in places. The porters rested around the huts and the trekkers down by the memorial on a terraced area. Some locals were also there with a dog and kids watching us have lunch.



I had read a lot about this location and it hit me once I settled that this was the place where a lot of action was and many soldiers on both sides died here. I felt odd and wondered how I should feel about being there on such blood stained soil. The four memorial granite boulders were only just visible in the fog whilst we had lunch.

Lunch was a mixture of soups, noodles, crackers and cheese, and water. This was heaps and I found myself not wanting to eat much. I think this was my cold keeping tabs on me. I filled my water and prepared it for the afternoon walk thinking I had drunk heaps already and seemed to be very thirsty along the way. My legs were good, my knees were feeling fine, only slightly sore back and shoulders, so all good in that respect.

A few trekkers came in with news that Symon had fallen and broken his wrist. This was terrible news and all the trekkers discussed this for a while. Symon was being assisted into camp and we could only wait until he arrived to find out more and see if we could help. Luckily with our group we had so many emergency services type people, Symon was in good hands and was given pain medication and support for the trek into the battle site. I was wondering how hard it must have been to walk with only one arm free and across the terrible roots and rocks on the track.

The memorial was grand with a large circular area marked with white coloured pebbles containing four large 3 tonne dark coloured granite blocks. They each had on them one word representing the spirit of Kokoda: "Courage", "Mateship", "Sacrifice" and "Endurance". They stood solid amongst a number of displays explaining the battles and the Kokoda Track itself. We wondered around for a while looking at all the displays and thinking to ourselves. When Josh arrived we listened to a few stories and background information about the site before taking photos and returning to our packs. I certainly felt sad and humbled

by what was achieved by our Diggers at this site and struggled to hide my feelings amongst the group and I was not alone.

Some local kids were given Dodo PJs and a footy which went down well. They were very happy to receive something and waved goodbye to us all as we set off for the next camp at Alola. The walk was not too far to Alola for Kokoda and had a mix of steep up and downhill sections but was mainly downhill. The village was visible from 200m away and as I trekked towards it I noticed I was in the first third of the group today with only a few people ahead of me.

Another trekking group had already secured the lower hut and site so we all went up to a higher section of Alola which was a sizeable village as shown in the photos. Our tents took up two terrace areas and also two huts were used by the trekkers and another by the porters. My tent was on the lower terrace whilst many of my friends were up on the higher terrace. This was good as I got to move around and mingle between groups more this evening. The huts used for sleeping were essentially a wooden floor and everyone just found a spot and secured it with their sleeping mats. In no time clothes were hanging up on anything that can hold weight in an attempt to dry a bit looking like a gigantic clothes horse.



Popcorn and fruit was available straight away as the porters had been there for a while already preparing the tents and dinner. Lots of the trekkers had very sore feet complete with blisters and some nasty chaffing on their legs. I was lucky so far with nothing to complain about. My cold still was giving me grief but other than that I was fine. Trekkers came in over the next hour or so but all before dark. The group had spread out again over some distance. The weather was colder but still warm and the rain had stopped at least for the afternoon and evening.

Several fires were lit to help dry clothes and in no time people had sticks with shirts draped over them cooking them like a leg of lamb, and shoes circling the fires almost too close trying to dry out. Dinner was a yummy tomato and fresh vegetable pasta and went down very well. I was still not super hungry and had a small serve. A few characters in the group brought out beer and wine that they had carried all the way so far much to the amusement of others. There were lots and lots of cats and dogs hanging around all covered in fleas but cute.



Everyone made it to bed about 8:30pm following a full day of trekking. To keep us all aware that we were not home in our comfortable suburban houses the local village roosters decided to keep us in check with crows at 3am, 4am, 5am and 6am. I swear they would have been roast chicken rolls for lunch if any of us

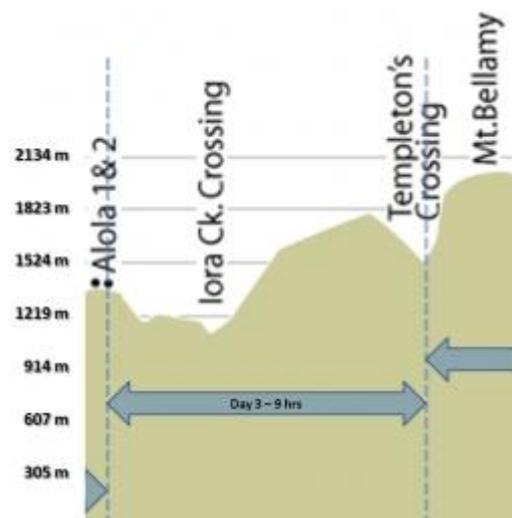
could be bothered to get up and find them. I slept well otherwise and managed to have a tent to myself somehow as most people opted for the huts tonight. zzzzzzz cock-a-doodle-do zzzzzzzz

Day 3: Thu 27 Sep 07

Alola to Templeton's Crossing No. 2

Today will be a big day with our hike taking us from Alola to Templeton's One via Eora Creek and Templeton's Two with long ascents and descents with heaps of gunners pits along the way. Day 3 is also known in trekking circles as the boogie-man day where people tend to deal with their trekking demons having walked far enough to get pooped and not too far to be in the swing of things. So today I was expecting to find it hard with close to 9 hours walking.

I was up at 6am and ready to walk by 7am. I didn't have any breakfast feeling terrible with the head cold making me feel sick. It should be the biggest meal of the day but I just didn't feel like it. Others were busy packing and getting ready. Two groups were leaving today one on the track by 6:30am and the other at 7am. The first group was for those who were finding it hard and the later group for those who typically walk faster. This was an attempt to move the slower members along faster to keep the group bunched together more as the day was going to be hard going.



The first 30 mins on the trek out of Alola is very steep downhill from Alola through choko-vine fields along narrow single file tracks. The rain has held off for now but the sun was out early. At the bottom of the steep climb a log crossing was the next obstacle. This log crossing was a little harder than others so the porters took our packs for us and we went over. Up the other side and off again. This climb was pretty steep but short. From this point we kept moving along the valley now heading uphill again through long steep sections until we reached a junction where we stopped for a while.



At this junction most of us dropped our packs and went for a 5 minute walk detour up a short track to see where a Japanese mountain gun was once stationed commanding the valley overlooking Eora Creek. The local villager owns this spot so we each paid 5 Kina. The site didn't have the gun any more as it was taken by the Japanese during the war but a lot of ammunition was remaining. Many Japanese foxholes also remained and this spot was obviously an excellent stronghold. The Australians had a hard time capturing it during the war and struggled to make it past. Many photos were taken and the rest was great.

In this section the jungle was thick rainforest, wet and slippery with rain on and off. Heading down from the mountain gun we traversed a steep track to our first significant log crossing with many sections spanning the creek at Eora Creek. The quick 15 minutes trek down was painful to those with sore knees and many took it very slowly. I was ok but I was suffering from deep mucus filled coughs and a shocking runny nose and headache. The hardest part is uphill where I found it so hard to breath. These downhill parts were great and I considered them to be like a break. We didn't stay long in Eora Creek and passed through quickly. Only a few huts and some villagers.



Now the next few hours are listed in my notebook diary as a "long steep torture climb up". This climb was indeed nasty and went from 1425m to 1910m but over a long distance so it was a drawn out long climb. The heat came out for us and baked me. This slope had heaps of false peaks and at some stages I was walking 20m, stopping gasping for breath and then moving on after 2-3 minutes rest. Others found it tough also and the group spread out even further. The forest was a bit more open here and I spotted some Australian rectangular foxholes along the track.

At the top of this monster long hill at 1910m we rested preparing for the downhill expected after any uphill section. That is the good thing about Kokoda that whenever you go up, you go down again later just as far. The first stop would be Templeton's Crossing No. 2 200m below. The track would wind down through and around the mountain over slippery wet muddy tracks covered in roots. We also saw many trees with what looked like their branches upside-down in the mud. These branches were roots and they reached up to about 5m above ground where the trunk took off. This walk down took a while and seemed like days.

Reaching Templeton's Crossing No. 2 was a great relief. This indicated lunch and a longer rest stop. The site was broken into a lower and upper section. We stayed on the lower smaller section as another group had arrived in the upper part where most of the village huts were. Our spot had grass and excellent access to the creek for a wash. Porters had prepared some lunch and the others were washing or relaxing. The concern now was that the group had spread out so far that some were still hours away. The hike over to Templeton's Crossing No. 1 was still a good 1.5 to 2 hours over a reasonable hill and perhaps a tough ask for those still to come. A decision was made to wait until 3pm and if everyone had not made it in we would not move off.



At 3pm we decided to stay at Templeton's Crossing No. 2 and camp here overnight as the others had not arrived yet. The group is massive and this sort of logistical problem is not a typical problem to have to deal with. Porters set up any tents that they had with the porters who had arrived already and those few who were here already jumped in the creek for a cold but awesome bath. The cold water was refreshing and excellent for sore muscles. The creek had a strong current and made for some fun wading around. One trekker also attempted to fish much to the porters delight who watched with interest.



Later in the afternoon the remaining trekkers arrived looking pretty shagged. The long line of trekkers and porters wound their way through camp and settled in. Some had showers in a warm shower set-up by porters who warmed water and charged 5 Kina per shower. Others braved the creek and some just plonked down tending their feet covered in blisters. My shoulders were sore but otherwise I had made it through day 3 ok. I was feeling very snuffled and my cough was very painful. My energy levels were low and I felt drained.



Josh our guide was told of some new war graves discovered by the locals just over the other side of the village a short walk away. We zipped over there, paid our 5 Kina and checked out the graves marked with star pickets in a cleared spot. Not sure if they were real or not but it didn't matter really as it was still sobering and thought provoking. The villagers had also collected a range of weapons and ammunition which was on display nearby. This short walk took us over a great log bridge and past several huge spider webs that hung in the trees.



Dinner was prepared by the porters again and was a yummy curry with cuscus and fresh vegetables. Fresh water was from the creek and made sure I had mine all filled for day 4 saving time in the morning. Some trekkers used the hut whilst most slept in tents. The clothes lines around camp became a little dangerous with so many of them at head height. The porters were also busy preparing for the next day and many also took the opportunity to wash having a wow of a time upstream with much laughter to be heard.

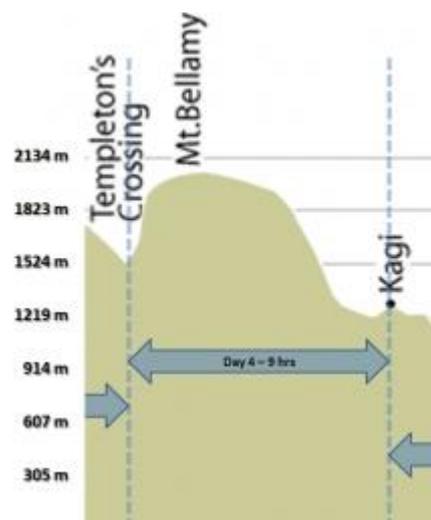
I slept in a tent tonight with no problems getting to sleep. Without a rooster the night was quiet and peaceful with only the creek water running in the background. I went out like a light around 8pm.

Day 4: Fri 28 Sep 07

Templeton's Crossing No 2 to Kagi

With no roosters to wake me up during the night I slept but tossed and turned a lot due to being a bit sore on my shoulders. I woke up around 5am to get ready early and planned to head off in the slower group leaving around 6am. The day was going to be tough with the extra hour or so we missed out on yesterday.

Packing takes longer than you think and I didn't leave enough time for breaky which was porridge and cereal. Not feeling well I didn't want much but being the most important meal of the day and feeling weak clogged up in my nose and head I figured I should have at least eaten something to give the energy I would need today. I was bogged down with getting water, purifying it, going to the toilet, packing for wet conditions, cleaning my boots a bit more and finding all my bits before I left camp. Need to do better tonight at the next camp.



Just to remind us all where we were it started to rain as we left camp for the first torturous 45 minutes straight up the side of a hill with the first 10 minutes being very steep indeed. This part was very difficult and took a lot out of me. I would walk up 20-30m and stop for a few minutes and then keep going. Without my cold I think I would have still been pretty buggered walking this bit but better than this. Others passed me and then I would pass them as we leap-frogged up to the top at around 1970m.



The jungle was now more thinned out with the larger trees more visible in the undergrowth. I passed a number of Aussie foxholes and then some Japanese ones. The rain kept me cool and eventually I made it to the top ready for the decent down to Templeton's Crossing No. 1. Now we were planning to do this yesterday and I think if we did we would have 100% had people walking in the dark as this was a tough hill. The descent down to Templeton's Crossing No. 1 was ok for me as I like downhill more than uphill. It had a lot of twists and turns and was not a bad section of the track even with the rain. The jungle was showing signs of thinning out just a bit as we went down the slope of the valley again to our next water crossing.

Templeton's Crossing No. 1 was on the other side of the creek on the uphill side which forms the base of Mt. Bellamy our next challenge. I was hanging for a toilet stop and searched around for a drop loo with a seat - I was in luck. Amazing how good it is to have some time to yourself and relax on the loo without the pressure of 41 other trekkers waiting for a go. I could hear some other members of the group heading off up the hill which we were warned was steep, slippery and hard work.



As a camp site this would have been a great one also. The village was split over several levels with good shelters and open areas for pitching tents. The water was great and the log crossing very sturdy. The group had split up now with trekkers spread over an hour or so and some probably still heading up the first long hill. This will be a long hard day and I wondered how some of the members would go given the terrain still ahead of us. I wondered how I would go as today I really felt weak, tired and the cold had me by the balls making coughing, sneezing and just breathing an effort.

After some glucose tablets and lollies, a good drink and a bit of a muesli bar (usually love them but not this time) I set off into the jungle again. Now Mt. Bellamy is a steep hill on the various maps I had with me and listed as "very steep in places". Yes, whoever did the maps was right. It was very steep and with all the rain the track was literally like a slip-n-slide with ankle deep thick mud, lots of tree roots and sections where the track just went straight up so hang on. If I didn't have my poles I would have found it very hard to navigate without falling every few steps.

This steep climbing seemed to go for hours and each corner led to another to another until finally I reached what seemed to be the top. The "Kokoda Gap" is the highest section of the track at 2190m and really a plateau. No views as the trees were too thick. The track just snaked around the top heading to the other side. Mud mud mud. If my son was here he would have loved the mud. Thick, sticky and everywhere. Walking along here was ok and I used this section to recoup my energy and just coast along. I walked with Jarrod, Gary and some of the others who had joined me.



Our spirits were lifted by some funny events like Jarrod slipping over, Gary running ahead for video grabs and special comments and telling terrible jokes. I was glad to have made it so far and I spent some time thinking about home, my wife and son, and what it must have been like during the war trudging along this section injured or heading off to be at the front line.

Every little hill was looked upon as a challenge and I was pooped. The plateau rolls along for a while and we spent a good 40 minutes hiking over it to reach the downhill section on the other side. This was again slippery, dotted with small creek crossings, passes through the "Moss Forest" where huge trees are covered in moss and the area is generally wet and misty.



Our lunch break today is to be a place called "1900 Junction" which is half way down the first descent from the top of Mt. Bellamy. The track leading down to this spot was very very slippery and took some effort to navigate. The rest break was well over-due and as we entered the clearing, crossing a log over a lovely creek, we all plonked our packs down and set about relaxing. Several porters had arrived already and made a fire for our hot water, and some trekkers had been here for a while already.





Filling my water bladder and bottle were my first tasks. Actually getting to the creek to fill up was a challenge. The banks were all a bit too steep and high to jump down so a longer more complex climb around several fallen logs and a few careful jumps allowed me to access the creek. Of course, now that I was there, others threw their bottles down for a fill-up. Once this was done I spent some time sitting, trying to blow my nose (stuff kept coming out constantly) and coughing up a lung.

Some of the group played rugby and a bit of AFL with the porters who were all great. They didn't seem to be tired or sore. A group of locals were huddled under a small hut watching on. I thought to myself I wonder what they think of us taking over their site and running around playing footy etc.. The youngest kid was about one and a half and was carrying a large machete around swinging it at anything that looked like it might need chopping. It certainly is a different world.

Lunch was a cup-a-soup, some salada crackers with cheese and a few lollies. Anything else for me would have come straight back up. Others also had noodles, coffee, tea etc. and their own lunch snacks. The remainder of the group trickled in over the next hour or so. The very tail end took some time to arrive and recounted stories of their trek so far along the last section.

The afternoon would be mostly downhill, very slippery and dangerous in the rain. Kagi is situated around 1400m and we were at 1900m. 500m downhill in about 3hrs in the rain tired. Challenge noted and accepted. Josh our guide spoke with the head porter and they offered two options for the trek to Kagi. One was to go out via an old downed bomber and then around to Kagi which was a slightly longer distance. The other option was to head down a more direct route the locals use to get to Kagi, slightly shorter but no less difficult in the rain. The intention was then to all head over to Naduri (nearby to Kagi) to visit the last living fuzzy wuzzy and pay our respects.

I chose the shorter more direct route only because I was feeling poorly and wanted to make camp as soon as possible. The majority of the group went with option two and the rest went via the bomber. The track starts off the same and branches left a short distance from 1900 Junction to head off to the bomber. Our track went straight on essentially walking along a plateau again until we reached the beginning of the very steep descent into Kagi. The forest was more open again much like our own highlands with large trees and less undergrowth. This section of the track took a while and seemed to go for longer than I expected until the goal was visible as we came out into the open.



What a view straight out over Kagi and into the distance. The clearing we came out into was full of Kunai Grass and hotter than under the cover of the jungle. Almost on queue the rain started again and was heavier than usual. The track became very wet and slippery and made walking without slipping over a real challenge. The group I had stuck with found the next few hours challenging as we headed straight down the hill 500m. The track was so steep in sections it looked like the side of a cliff with a few steep/roots to grab onto to slip/jump down over. Walking poles were essential here and saved us from certain head-to-toe mud baths.



As we walked closer to Kagi the terrain levelled out slightly and we could see our goal again. The village was situated on the top of a hill and overlooked all the surrounding areas. Thinking to myself I could see why you would pick that position as it is strategically a solid place to defend during the more hostile times in PNG history. To get to it we had to walk along very narrow paths that had steep drop-off's each side covered in grass so you didn't realise unless your walking pole slipped down suddenly indicating this. About now I was in auto-pilot mode just walking until I made it.

Looking left and right I could see villages and wondered where the others would meet us and head up to Kagi. What looked like a large school could be seen to our left in the valley and on the right more mountains now covered in fog. I decided I wanted to be first into Kagi today and set off at a faster pace. The others were behind me but I managed to keep my pace and lead us all into Kagi through a number of outer-Kagi huts where villages shouted and laughed at us. Seemed odd and I was starting to feel a little vulnerable now.

With extra caution I trekked into the village heading straight ahead until I could see our camp. Walking the entire length of Kagi to reach camp situated at the southern end on a raised section I paraded past all the locals with a few porters stopping off to say hi to people they knew. The rain was pelting down and splashing up from the dirt throughout the village. The huts were a slightly higher in quality than others I had seen so far. Kagi has an air-strip so supplies are easier to obtain I guessed. Everyone seemed happy waving but I still felt uneasy.

The last little hill lead me past the Rotary International building (in extremely good condition) which I was later told is the village council building or similar and up to an area used by No Roads for their camp at Kagi. I later discovered many of the porters came from Kagi and a lot of the families in this spot are linked to the porters on our trek. I made a bee-line for any guest-house available as I wanted to stretch out tonight and escape a tent if possible. Luckily a hut was available and I snaffled a room for a few of us (Dom, Kate and myself). My turn tonight for leg room!





The locals had a number of eating shelters set-up and this campsite was quite large. Running water was available in the cold shower and the two drop toilets on the far side of camp. I spent some time just chatting to fellow trekkers as they arrived and ate lots of fresh salty popcorn cooked by the porters. Trekkers came in over the next few hours some looking really shagged and others happy to arrive in good spirits. The mob that went on the longer route also went over to see the fuzzy wuzzy at Naduri and said it was amazing and quite emotional for them. The extra walking was worth it.

I knew the other group went on a longer trek but I soon became sick of them saying it was so much harder than the way we all went. How could they know? They didn't walk both ways.... Anyway, I was told their track had some amazingly hard sections and they did it very hard too. Next time I will have to check out that section to see what it was like. Either way, we both had a tough afternoon in the heavy rain but that is Kokoda I guess.

As people settled themselves in for the evening we were delighted to hear a group of local women and children sing a few songs for us. The words we didn't understand but the song sounded great and really made us all feel welcome. This camp also had a number of local huts with families and it was interesting to watch them go about their normal day.



My feet were feeling ok tonight but others were sporting nice blisters and horrible rashes from wet feet and chaffing. Looking around camp you could see at all times someone fiddling with their feet and applying ointments or blister pads to prepare for the next day. I walked around in my crocs which was great as my feet had time to dry out, even though it did rain a bit.

I had a nice cold shower whilst others waiting in line and paid for a warm shower. Whilst the water was cold it was so nice to clean up a bit and change from jumping in the closest creek. Our guesthouse started to resemble a drying room with every

possible hanging space used for drying damp clothes and the floor was full of no less than about 25 pairs of wet, smelly, muddy boots all competing with each other for the smelliest shoes alive award. My clothes were up early and started to feel dryer and a bit better now.

The locals sold Coke and Fanta and other soft drinks as usual and I bought a few tonight. I was feeling a little better now but still sporting a head cold, deep cough and running nose. I have now used nearly half a roll of dunny paper just for blowing my nose.

Dinner was a lovely vegetable rice curry and this was yummy. Steaming hot and full of flavour. Just what the doctor ordered and everyone agreed. With rain still falling not many of us bothered to stay up and chat so people wandered off to bed pretty quickly dreading tomorrow which is supposed to be a killer.



Our room was full of sleeping mats, bags and Dom, Kate and myself. With the room crammed pack full of our stuff and every inch taken for sleeping, we all snuggled in and slowly went to sleep. I spent some time thinking of home again and talking to Dom and Kate about how the day was for myself before dozing off ready with Dominic's alarm set for 4:30am!!!

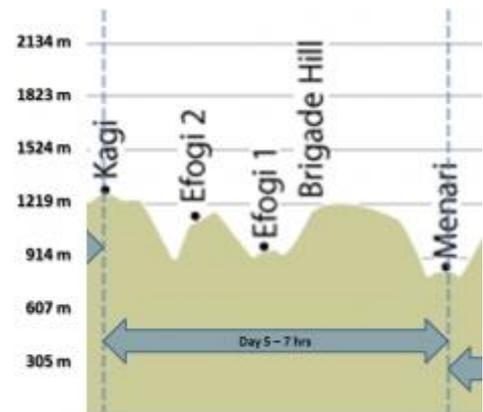
Day 5: Sat 29 Sep 07

Kagi to Menari

Half way through the trek now into day five, still enjoying the challenge, the scenery and company. Overnight I didn't sleep very well for a number of reasons. The funniest is that the hut wobbled as people rolled over or moved. Second, snoring from various rooms and thirdly because it was hot and I struggled to relax in the heat. So up at 4:30am, yes 4:30am today as people began to rise and start packing for our early 6am departure today.

I really wanted to leave in the earlier group knowing today was going to be even tougher than any other day before so I started quietly packing my sleeping gear, stuffing my clothes into the stuff sacks into my pack etc.. This is hard to do quietly and within no time the whole hut is up packing giving up on any sleeping in.

With my pack all set to go, Dominic taking some of my gear (sleeping bag, wet clothes bag and sleeping mat) to add to his porters pack, I went to have some breaky and fill my water and begin purification. I ate one pancake but really didn't feel great so eating was not something I was doing a lot of. This of course is not so good as I left on an empty stomach with little energy. Most people were up by 5:30am and the now familiar rustle of tents, zippers, quiet chit-chat about "have you seen my ..." or "can I borrow some blister pads" could be heard all over camp.



It was still dark until about 5:45am and most people prepared by headlamp which looked kind of cool across the camp with 40 odd people getting ready, plus the porters. The sun rose up casting beams of light over the mountain side which was amazing, but alas the clouds were also present and rain looked like it would be on the cards again today. The view across the valley was a little shrouded in fog again making the jungle look very mysterious and foreboding. Many of the locals had also got up to see us off and were standing around watching us scurry about preparing.

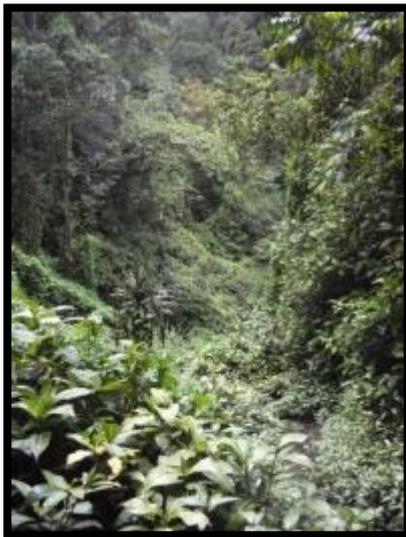
Trekkers began lining up near the entrance to the camp with poles in hand, packs on or ready to put on, hats on, sunscreen applied, boots and gaiters on, drinking water tubes at the ready and by 6:10am we had a group ready to head off. The others in the faster mob were still half ready staggering around having slept in a bit longer than ourselves. Hard to believe we got up at 4:30am today. So with fond memories of Kagi our half-way point, we set off, Justin the the lead for no other reason than I was keen to get moving.



To leave camp we had to head back into Kagi going down the small hill we came up, and then off around to the left skirting around the hill the camp was on past the Kagi airstrip perched on the side of the mountain and then off into the jungle. Now it was wet overnight and the ground still very muddy, slippery and wet. The map shows very steep downhill from Kagi to Main Creek at 980m a drop of 500m or so. This was a very steep and slow walk downhill that tested most of us, and first thing in the morning was tough.

The track was very narrow, wiggly skirting around the mounting and heading down through thick jungle into an area full of choko-vines. I didn't mind this so much but my nose was full of mucus and causing me to blow my nose every 50m or so, yuk! PS: blow means bushmans snot off the track - double yuk. Anyway, the line of trekkers snaked its way down the very very steep hill quite slowly and soon spread out as people

tired. I think some people were finding their knees were unhappy with this onslaught so early in the day without much of a warning or warm-up.



Reaching the bottom of the hill was a relief with a lovely big log crossing and beautiful creek with fast flowing water racing past. The relief was short lived when I looked over at the other side to see what we had to go up. I was first over the log crossing assisted by several porters and what presented in front of us was literally a sheer muddy wall with a track barely visible. This was listed on the map as a "very steep incline" and it was. For most of this climb we used tree roots to help haul ourselves up to the next part of the track. Very slow going and this was especially hard for me with my lungs struggling to get enough oxygen through my gasping mouth as my nose was blocked.

Reaching the top of that 200m incline I sat down for 10 minutes to regain some composure and energy. A group of us all sat on, beside, draped over a large fallen log quietly regrouping as others came up to join us. This was a killer hill and one I remember as a great challenge, but extremely hard! I later found out some call it "The Wall" which is very appropriate.



The trek up to Efogi Upper or Efogi 2 on the top of the hill we were climbing was a long long long slow walk up and up and up never stopping or going down for about an hour. It was mostly in the open with little canopy for shade and the rain had stopped so it was hot! With my energy reserves at rock bottom I dragged myself up this hill watching other pass me along the way. Kunai grass on either side of the track kept me company and I must say I was literally putting one foot in front of the other to make it up this section. When I came into the village and walked through to the upper section where most people had gathered, I just plonked down and made a star-fish pattern with my arms and legs and zonked for 5 minutes.

The views from Efogi Upper were excellent and we could see back towards Kagi (covered still by some mist/fog) and forward to the valley where Efogi Lower could be seen. This village had about 10 huts and the locals came out to say hi and sell drinks. Local puppy dogs also roamed around looking cute but flea ridden. Pretty much everyone spent a good 30 minutes here before moving on just resting from the tolling past few hours. Lunch was still hours off and we had a long way to go. I began doubting myself based on my past few hours efforts which was not so good.



After a few jokes, a can of coke and some lollies, I perked up and set off for Efogi Lower at the bottom of the hill which looked fairly close. Actually it wasn't and it took about 30 minutes to get to. The walk down was steep and slippery but not too bad except it was still in the open and I was cooking. At the bottom I filled up with water again in the creek and nearly fell in which was funny. I did a quick hop and step back over the log bridge saving myself from falling in. The short walk up into Efogi Lower was tolling and I can be seen in video footage actually walking up a path dragging my poles with no effort to move my hands, a sorry sight indeed. Not sure what I was thinking then.

Efogi Lower was a big village with about 20 huts all on stilts and the ground was bare mud again. Symon, Jill, Jarrod, Gary, Tony, myself and some others sat down for a quick rest before heading through the village to tackle Brigade Hill. A few porters went past and they mentioned it is still a few hours walking before lunch. Not encouraging but honest answer to our question. Symon sporting his trendy wrist injury all packaged up looked tired and in pain. He said his arm was ok but I could tell it was hurting and walking having to hold it up would have been tough. My cold didn't seem so bad.



We spotted an old tractor rusting away under a hut which must have been there for a long time. We all pondered how it would have got there, slung loaded under a chopper? Anyway, it was cactus now and gathering weeds. This was the last hut before our journey took us into another valley with a creek log crossing just after the Efogi airfield. Heading into the cover of the trees was great and I quickly perked up again. Heat really affected me and drained my energy. Unfortunately the quick section through the valley switched to a long uphill section in the open along a narrow track that switch backed all the way up to Mission Ridge.

Walk 5m stop, wait one minute, panting. Continue up another 10m, stop gasping. This went on for 200m or so until I had to sit and get my breath back. This is when my adopted porter Joram stepped in. He had been following me all day and noticed I was struggling in the heat. Without any hesitation he took my pack, began moving the contents around and strapped it to his own pack to carry up the hill. He still had a full 35kg pack and now mine 18kg or so strapped on. I felt bad but accepted this offer of assistance and almost sprinted up the hill without the weight on my back.



At Mission Ridge, a small outcrop at the top of the switch-backs, I joined a group of fellow trekkers admiring the view and resting. I explained what had happened and they all said I should have done that hours ago and not been so stubborn about trying to do it with my pack when I was so sick also. Anyway, Joram came up the track looking like a man mountain with a waterfall of sweat pouring off him. I felt so bad and gave him a stack of my lollies I was just given by some other trekkers.

From Mission Ridge to Brigade Hill I followed Joram helping him in some spots by pushing up on the packs from behind and in other spots pulling him up by hand over some steep sections. The track narrowed and entered the jungle again and was very pretty. I was on my second wind having relief from the extra pack weight now. I still felt very bad loading up Joram but he insisted it was ok and kept going. He did admit that it was extra tough with both packs and pretty hard. As we entered the saddle just below Brigade Hill I filled

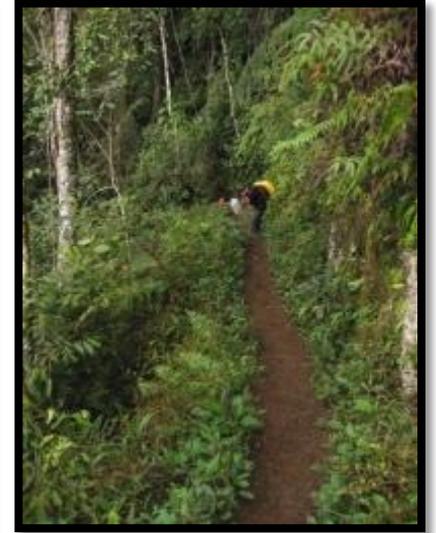


my water bottle and bladder from a tap which seemed so out of place in the middle of nowhere. I filled Joram's 1 litre bottle also, the only water he carried but refilled often.

Brigade Hill was exactly like I had thought it would be and no different to any photo or video you may have seen. The small simple memorial and views stunning. Two huts were located further ahead over a dip and that is where lunch was today. Many trekkers from our group had arrived and another large group from another trekking company had arrived also having lunch nearby. Joram joined his porter mates and said he would shuffle the contents of his pack and mine so I could take mine

back with only my water and a few things like my hat, first aid kit, snacks and maps etc and he would take the rest in his pack. Ok.

After a quick wizz in the bushes and some food (noodles, salads with cheese) we all walked up to the memorial for a history lesson from Josh. The battle site is certainly very significant and the stories amazing. I knew this place would upset me so I sat up the back to hide. Many others were taken by the emotion the hill brings out and spent time to themselves afterwards thinking and looking around. The Japanese killed many Australians here and it was sacred soil in my book. I thought about what it must have been like during the night here, dug into a foxhole not knowing if the Japanese were 10m in front of you or not, not knowing if you would be dead in a while. The ridge the battle site was on was surrounded by thick jungle on each side and it is amazing that both sides fought up and down those sheer sides of the ridge.



With lunch and the history lesson finished I grabbed my map to see what I was in for this afternoon. Oops, bad move. A few others gathered around to see the words "very steep tiring incline" for a least 2 hours listed on the map (1415m down to 705m). With my significantly lighter pack on and energy to burn, I set off down the hill in the rain. What a hill. It went on and on and on. Slippery, muddy but mostly wider than the tracks this morning. Those with knees playing up HATED this section as it never let up. Near the bottom it became very wiggly and steeper leading into a river crossing. I felt ok at this point with my knees holding up well.

As we entered the creek crossing area quite abruptly out of the jungle we noticed a huge log. Porters had not set up a rope yet to assist in the crossing so we took the time to jump in for a wash and rest. The water

was amazingly cold and refreshing and flowing fast. The section of the creek we swam in had a number of rocks in positions where we could hold on or prop to allow the water to rush past us providing much enjoyment for all. About eight or so of us who had arrived first played around relaxing in the water for about half an hour until it started raining again. The water was excellent on sore muscles and having a chance to wash was nice also. Most people who arrived cleaned their feet and took a short rest break.

During our play in the water the porters had strung up a few vines in an attempt to make a safety line with limited success. The porter with the rope had either gone on ahead or was behind. Some of the porters were upstream having fun also. The scene was surreal being so far into the middle of nowhere in the jungle and so many people all splashing around in the creek having fun in the rain. I knew I was in for too long when my muscles started to cramp up a bit so I jumped out and put my boots on again. Clean socks now having washed them.

Amongst the heavy rain we set off up the next hill to Menari which we were told was only 30 minutes away. The walk was still hard and extra slippery with the rain making the track nice and wet. It snaked its way up through a valley to the bottom of the Menari airstrip. This bit was easy and I even ran a bit to catch up with Jill who was ahead by 60m. Puffing as I arrived we chatted and walked into Menari together.

Menari is one of the nicest villages and our campsite was to the right of the airstrip on the lower part of the village. It was surrounded by a creek in a deep ravine and sounded pretty fast given all the noise it was making. The campsite was a large open grassed area surrounded by several huts including one guesthouse and a shelter for meals. The porters took two guesthouses and some trekkers another. I managed to score a tent to myself tonight. Josh almost needed a tent but at the last minute went somewhere else leaving me with room to spread out - neat.

I arrived with the tail end of the first group and we all set about tending to our sore feet, cleaning and preparing our tents for the night. The footy came out and was given a good go especially given it was AFL Grand Final day today. The porters joined in for a kick to kick until too many tents were put up and space ran out. I just missed stepping on a live scorpion near the water tap whilst in bare feet. This scared me having not seen a live scorpion before and I was not wearing my crocs as my feet were enjoying the lush green soft grass. Crocs went on and I spread the word.



My feet were pretty sore today purely from the sheer number of kilometres we walked today and the very steep inclines. They just needed some air to dry out and some rubbing points were sore. I expected this given the day we had and after a while they felt better. They looked terrible but at least mine were in very good nick compared with others I peeked at around camp. Eeek. Nasty huge blisters on multiple toes etc.. yuk.

As for my cough and runny nose, headache etc., well now they were all feeling a bit better with less coughing and sneezing. I think the reduced pack weight and early arrival at camp helped today. The last trekker arrived just before dusk to a round of applause and pats on the back. I actually ran down to meet them at the intersection of the track and the path into the campsite. Michelle and Steve, Cooky and others were with them and I hadn't seen them all day. They looked tired but ok.



Dinner tonight was rice and a vegetable curry with fresh local veggies. I had 2 serves as I was hungry. I also had a few soft drinks which gave me a short energy boost and they tasted ace. Still odd that in the middle of the jungle I could have a coke! It was decided during dinner that we would have a little round table discussion about how we were feeling about the trek in terms of what emotional effect has it had on us.

After dinner we all remained in the shelter, hiding from the rain but only just as we didn't really all fit in being such a huge group. One by one we went around the group and it was very interesting to see what the track has done for people and to hear how they were coping, feeling and what has been a highlight so far. I mentioned how I discovered how much I missed by wife and son and that the link I have to the track with my Great Uncle who fought here was strong and emotional for me. Yep, I did shed a tear but that is the thing about the track, it brings out your emotions as everything is so raw and you have no need to hide behind anything. Many others did too and I thought it was a great exercise.

The Geelong supporters were keen to see how they went in the AFL Grand Final so Josh spent several hours attempting to get through to Peter on the sat phone. At last they were put out of their misery and told Geelong had won easily. Lots of chest beating and smiles all around. And with that news most people went to bed. I was in bed and out like a light at 9:30pm expecting to sleep very soundly tonight with only the rain on the tent and the sound of the creek running around camp in the ravine below. Excellent.

PS: Used smelly socks, clothes and jocks in close proximity in the tent really stink!!

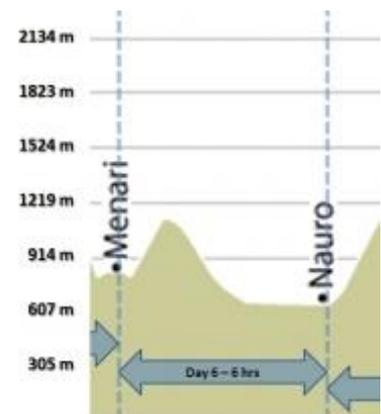
Day 6: Sun 30 Sep 07

Menari to New Nauro Village

On the elevation map today it looks like it should be easier than other days with only one big hill to cross over and some swampy sections. My night in Menari was great with a solid sleep, not much rain to write home about and I managed to sleep stretched out in the tent. My coughing was bad and I had a very runny nose again which was the only negative so far. So once again I was up around 5:30am leaving my tent at about 6:00am.

My feet felt good and had dried well overnight. With a little extra space in the tent I had my wet clothes with me drying. Dryer than normal socks, jocks, shorts and T-shirt was nice - but gee they stank overnight. No pain no gain they say. I didn't have much breaky like other days just not feeling like any. I should have as I needed the energy, even if I was feeling crappy.

Joram my new porter grabbed my stuff sacks, sleeping bag and other heavier items to put in his pack leaving me with a significantly lighter pack. I still felt bad about this but I needed to give in to using a porter to make it to the end. My cold was killing me and not showing signs of getting any better.





In the middle of the jungle the porters and some of the more energetic trekkers kicked a footy to each other over all the tents and sometimes over the cliff! This was great to watch and not surprisingly some of the porters were great kicks. Much laughter was heard when marks were made and people dropped catches or kicked the ball over into the airstrip or a hut. I didn't join in reserving my energy but enjoyed the activity around me. My gear was packed so I had time to just wait and watch.



Menari is situated just below the steeper section of the hill ahead of us. The terrain was similar to before with

jungle canopy for much of the track and then long sections of open canopy allowing the hot sun to cook us along the way. I set off at 7:00am in the lead group in the lead but by the first 200m I was already slowing down and falling behind just simply stuffed. Grrrr. The sun was quite hot already and I had sweat just pouring off me.

The top of the hill was a good solid one hours hike with a fair portion of that time stopping, resting, panting, dripping sweat and looking up the hill just staring at the next part. As fellow trekkers passed it was common to hear "come on not far to go I'm sure", "hang in there", "come on slack arse" or simply a blank gaze or smile. By now everyone had experienced a bad day and totally understood what it felt like to be buggered.

The views from sections on the way up this hill were excellent and a lot of us stopped for photos of the landscape and group photos. Without rain the cameras came out more. Now the scary thing is that if I was an "Adventure Runner" I would be completing the entire track in the time I had left to walk to Ower's Corner from here. It is estimated to be 18 hours to reach Ower's Corner from Menari. How amazing is it that someone can run the entire track in 18 hours!!!



Reaching the top was great, time to relax and regroup with the others. Everyone was lounging around on logs and grass just chatting, taking photos, re-packing their pack, munching on nibbles or drinking. The sun was out and sky was blue. My notes say I was "stuffed". I also remember some friends asking if I was ok so I guess I must have been looking shocking. I know when I started coughing and sneezing I did sound bad and all the sweat pouring off me didn't help. I just wasn't my crazy climbing up the nearest tree to jump out at people self which was a shame.

There was a lot of encouragement for some of the trekkers doing it very hard with either injuries or fatigue issues. Everyone would clap as they camp in or yell out words of encouragement. Sooty had a great tradition established now yelling the "Aussie Aussie Aussie, oi, oi, oi" chant with the porters joining in. They often tried it themselves but got it wrong much to everyone's amusement. This bit of comedy really helped everyone relax and zoom off after a break smiling. One of the lead porters also had a special chant that could often be heard along the track used to single the movement of a group after a break.

Feeling better after the rest I decided to head off in the lead again as I liked downhill and could keep a cracking speed up. The track was a little wider but still very muddy and had lots of fallen trees. The undergrowth started to thin out a bit and the canopy come and go as we trailed slowly down the hill. The group had a cracking pace and within 40 minutes we reached a huge log crossing over a creek which signalled the start of some swampy land.



The Brown River was our short term objective for a rest and swim as it is supposed to be really good for a splash around and cool off. We crossed the large log crossing and soon afterwards entered a small village where some locals were selling cans of soft-drink and Twisties! Yum, most people bought some for the salt and novelty value. We rested here for 10-15 minutes and then set off again following the river which snaked around a bit. This walking was easier as the land was FLAT and open.

The swimming spot was about 30 mins on from our last stop and seemed like ages for me. I was hot and bothered. Heat and humidity really got to me and made this little walk awful. To cross this part of the river we had to take our shoes and socks off for the first time. This was ok and everyone did so quickly as they arrived. The log crossing here had fallen into the water so it only really helped us get from the bank 1m down into the river and then we waded across the rest. It was about 10m wide and had pebbles and sand on its river bed and shore.



In no time at all most of us were in the water cooling off. The current was quite strong and for some that allowed for fun floating down the river and running back up to do it again. The water was so cool and refreshing and as others arrived they too jumped in clothes and all. We spent about 40 minutes here relaxing as today we had made reasonable time. I jumped out about after 30 minutes feeling the heat and sheltered along the side of the river in the tree line under the shade of the tall trees. I got sunburnt on my bald spot!!! Ouch.

The time had come to move on so we dressed and loaded up for the next walk through to where we planned to have lunch only 30-40 minutes away. The section of track changed to more swampy terrain with the area clearly somewhere that floods. The track snaked its way around and through flat terrain to a village that we believe was the wartime Nauro. It had several huts and new shelters all in very good condition. Josh our guide had not seen these structures before so we assumed they were pretty new.

Our porters had the usual lunch offerings under-way and most of us spread out across the thick lush grass and lay around in the shade waiting to get a bite to eat. I had lunch which was for me a cup-a-soup and 1

cheese covered salada cracker. I was not super hungry and not typical of others who chowed down lots of food. I refilled my water and purified it with one of my tablets. Walking around again in my crocs allowed my feet to dry out again ready for the afternoon walk. I lay down and thought about my wife and son back home and wondered what they might be doing. I am sure when my son is older he would want to do this walk too and I thought to myself could I do it then? I hope so!



New Nauro Village was approximately half way up the next incline situated on one of the nine false peaks along this range. We were told to expect at least five false peaks each with their own false hope that you had made it to the camp. The incline was not horrendous but certainly took its toll on myself and others again. The hill just goes on and on and for about an hour we trekked up through slightly more dense undergrowth with more canopy. The rain pelted down at exactly 2:30pm when we started arriving at camp.

The village is situated on the ridge line and our camp-site just past the village on a few terraces off to the right from the track. As I walked in I could see a number of tents already erected under a shelter and other trekkers in the guest house hut. The rain was quite heavy as we arrived and my first priority was to escape it under shelter and regain my breath and composure. The track had become very slippery and took more effort to navigate over the last 20 minutes wearing me out more.

In all four huts/shelters were used to shelter everyone at this camp with our porters spread over two huts and trekkers in one with the other shelter covering about 10 tents. I was lucky to snaffle a spot on the floor in the guest house near the front with a view out over camp. We had about 25 trekkers in this hut and the hut looked like a gigantic dorm room at a Uni or school camp with dirty clothes everywhere, hanging up on anything that could hold clothes, camp mats and sleeping bags indicating beds and packs drying out along the edges.

Popcorn and hot water was made available and we all chowed down quite hungry and thirsty after the last hour or so of walking. The fresh water supply was actually about 40m downhill in a gully and quite tricky to access as the steps were all mud and very very slippery now. I had to take my trekking poles just to walk down there. In the end the porters brought up water in gerry cans for everyone saving the trip. The shower however was still down there so I walked down with a few others to check it out.



The shower was pretty cool made from bamboo. It had been cut down the middle and strategically placed so it took the water from a rock out over the edge creating a shower. The small shower group ducked under and splashed around to get somewhat cleaner. The amazing view from here looked out over the valley and a simple reminder of how remote and beautiful this place was.

Everyone came into camp before dusk tonight and whilst there were stories of shocking blisters and pains in all sorts of places you don't want to know about, everyone was in good spirits and looking forward to dinner. Dinner was a rice and vegetable curry with potatoes and very yummy. I had a big server tonight which perked me up a lot. I also bought a Coke and Fanta soft drink and packet of Twisties from the local villages who were selling them for 5 Kina each.

The thunder, lightning and heavy rain was now replaced with a thick fog creating an interesting atmosphere for the evening. Our porters had fun singing during the evening and were very good at it all keeping in tune. I am sure they do this often. Our shelter had a fluoro light in the roof which was a talking point for a while. The villages had a generator up the hill and used it now and then to power things. They don't use it often as fuel is hard to carry in. Lucky for us, they turned it on for a while so we had light. It flickered and went off a few times indicating the generator and fuel might need some attention.

Each night everyone had rituals that they performed in public or out-of-sight such as checking their feet for damage, thighs for chaffing, shoulders for muscle soreness and little things like brushing teeth and the usual personal hygiene tasks. My feet were ok tonight and didn't look as bad as last night having had the chance to dry them several times today. I was coughing a lot so I took some more cough syrup which seemed to help for a while. I did however notice my thighs had some nasty chaffing marks that I had not noticed until now. The bottom of my shorts which were constantly wet had been rubbing and drawn blood. I used my paw paw cream and antiseptic to provide some relief overnight and planned to lube up more tomorrow.



Our shelter was frequented by a very cute puppy that unfortunately was covered in fleas. It was almost like a rat scurrying around looking for friendship and food scraps. The puppy loved Michelle and kept hanging around her. Lots of funny stories were told tonight before bed. Sooty also impersonated "Gorillas in the Mist" for the local kids emerging from his tent with only his bike pants on much to the amusement of the kids.

Once again we all went to bed with a few groups chatting for a while and the porters still singing. I slept in my long pants and shirt with just my sleeping bag inner liner on tonight as it was still very hot. I could see out across the ridge from where we entered this afternoon and the tree line created an eerie profile against the moonlight. Lots of snoring from a few chainsaws sleeping in our shelter tonight so my ear-plugs came in handy. I cannot remember falling asleep but do remember tossing and turning a fair bit during the night feeling hot and sore on my shoulders.

Day 7: Mon 1 Oct 07

New Nauro Village to Ua-Ule Creek

The rain had stayed away and the fog had stayed around all night. I awoke to the now normal sounds of sleeping bag zippers un-zipping, busy hands rummaging through backpacks and footsteps as people stumbled around in the dawn light looking for the toilets. Today was our second last day of walking and I

was beginning to really look forward to the sense of accomplishment walking up and through the "Kokoda Trail Gateway" structure at Ower's Corner signifying the end of the trek (for us, start for WWII soldiers).

Not everyone was awake yet and the loud snoring of some sleepy heads could be heard still. I never will understand how the heavy snorers do not wake themselves up! I had my pack ready by 6:30am for Joram to grab the bits he was going to carry. I didn't have any breaky which is bad I know, but I just didn't feel I could have any without throwing up. My head cold was still roaring along and my coughing started early this morning.



New Nauro Village is only half way up the incline to the top of the Maguli Range. So the first thing we did was to set off up the hill at 06:45am through the mist out past the last few remaining huts of the village and onto the track. This hill was long but in the grand scheme of things pretty straight forward and easy. Don't get me wrong, we all staggered our way up and the remaining four or five false peaks which really made the incline tiresome.



Upon reaching the top the group waited once again for the remaining members to catch up allow for a quick rest. Even now the group had spread out a fair distance and the tail end group would be still some time away. The view from this peak was spectacular and we could almost see back to Brigade Hill from here. We now had the challenge of walking down the other side of the Maguli Range to Ofi Creek at the bottom. Josh told us this was going to be steep and it certainly was.



The track now took us for about two hours heading down but not terribly steep. The canopy opened up to allow more light in and the undergrowth thinned out again. The track was muddy and slippery but nothing as bad as on previous days. Most of the group had now spread out of over a considerable distance. I swapped walking partners as some went forward and others fell behind. I found the downhill trek relatively easy even though I was coughing and blowing my nose regularly. My pace was good and my knees were holding up. My shoulders were sore though from the pack straps.

Ofi village is at the base of the Maguli Range in the valley and to get there the track heads straight down 400m. It is again very steep and slippery requiring some careful negotiation. The sight of this steep section sent some trekkers into despair as their knees had really been giving them trouble. Knee braces were seen now and some people took extra time walking down this bit. The track came out into the valley floor at the junction of two creeks with about a 10m crossing. No logs just rocks to hope across.

This spot was also our lunch break and most of us stopped for some time in the creek bed cooling off, resting our feet and having fun splashing around. At the same time I arrived a second trekking group heading in the reverse direction arrived and settled in for a break. This school group was around 29 trekkers and most were teenagers. The creek banks and most large rocks were soon covered in clothing, boots and socks all trying to dry off a little in the sunny weather. The creek was cold but very refreshing to those who jumped all the way in. Sore muscles relaxed in the cold water.



Looking back up the nasty hill we just climbed down I could see many others struggling down a few metres at a time taking it very carefully. Our group was only about one third in with the other two thirds spread hours back along the track. I felt sorry for the school group knowing what lay ahead of them! Lunch was called and we all quickly collected our belongings and scrambled up to the main village area (only 2-3 huts really) situated up on a small knoll in the middle of the valley with views in all directions.



The scenery was amazing with lush jungle in all directions, the sound of running fresh water, and the quiet chatter of trekkers eating lunch. Lunch was a cup-a-soup and noodle mix for me today trying to regain my energy and fluids. I also had some Salada crackers and cheese again which helped. I picked a great spot next to Sooty on the lovely thick grass behind a hut in the shade to have a power-nap. Oops, lucky I missed the dog poo. It seems even Kokoda has grass with dog poo on it, grrr. Anyway, a few minutes kip did the trick and without a moment's notice we were on the way again.

For some reason I wanted to be up nearer the front again and I set off with the lead group. Leaving Ofi Creek the track snaked up the other side of the valley starting with a steep section out of the village up a 45 degree angle incline to the top of Ioribaiwa Ridge. This climb was steep and tiresome once again with thick jungle broken by openings now and then where the sun had a chance to bake me again as I passed through.



The next hours or so was a mixture of steep up and downhill sections as we crossed over three peaks and trekked down into a sizeable village I believe to be Ioribaiwa with magnificent views of Imita Ridge and the valley before us. So as we crossed these peaks we reached the furthest point of the Japanese advance on the last peak. This spot was a good place to rest and also significant in the battle for Kokoda. Josh caught up to us and spent some time explaining the significance of the location and how the battle turned for the better for the Australians.

Something that took everyone by surprise was the sight of a grave beside the track with a cross marking the death of a 30 year old trekker who died there last year. It certainly made us all think a bit more about where we were and how dangerous the track is in so many ways. The site had several huge trees around it and off the track about 10 minutes away were some Japanese grave sites and foxholes. Josh took a small group off to see them whilst the remaining members of the forward group kept walking.



As I entered the village half way down the hill to the valley below where the creek snakes back and forth I could see about eight huts/houses with one still being built. All the framing was in place using logs and so on. A number of villagers were also outside to greet us as we plodded into the far end of the village which looks out over the valley below across to Imita Ridge, now shrouded in fog. The weather was hot and sunny with no rain expected later.

Most of us stopped for a few photos, some soft drink which was on sale and to empty out our shoes and prepare for the next few hours walking across the creek crossings into camp at Ua-Ule Creek. Many of the porters had gathered near the far end of the open village centre area and this was to be our exit down into the valley below. The track was pretty steep again heading down and took about 30-40 minutes.



The next hour was a combination of entering a creek traversing down a steep creek bank, crossing it by jumping over rocks and avoiding slipping over or in, then exiting the creek up another steep bank. This was repeated so many times I lost count! I would imagine we did this for at least 10-15 times during that hour. The rocks were often slippery and wobbly but nothing too full on. I had reached my official "pooped" level and just motored on in auto-pilot mode drinking quite a bit of water as we navigated across the valley floor to the Ua-Ule Creek campsite.

I wished I was feeling better (ie: no cold or coughing) as I really love creek rock hopping having grown up in Warrandyte in Victoria living on a creek and the Yarra River. This terrain was great fun usually to me but today I was just keen to arrive and rest at camp. The valley darkened as the sun began to lower in the evening sky and behind nearby mountains. My walking buddy tripped at one stage landing face down in the middle of several rocks as we crossed the creek for the nth time. Initially I thought he was dead as he didn't move but as it turned out, he was just stunned and stuck as his pack was weighing him down! Phew, no broken bones or injuries. I certainly took it more carefully from then on.

Upon reaching the campsite we were told this was where we would have camped if the group wasn't so big. So another 300-600m later we arrived at the real campsite up-stream. I actually think this one is better anyway. Without thinking what I should be doing I simply took my boots off, dumped my gear in front of a tent, and made a be-line for the creek where others had jumped in to cool off and wash. The creek had formed into an excellent water pool complete with a shower made from the rocks upstream forcing water through a tight section between the rocks. A number of us climbed in and sat around talking for at least 20-30 minutes. I could feel my knee and leg muscles relaxing.



The camp-site was at the base of Imita Ridge and in an area that had a number of large grassed terraced areas. Three shelters existed including a guest house for trekkers. I wasn't sure if it was only used by trekkers as a local family seemed to have camped under it now. I wonder if they move in and out as needed or if they owned it? Curious. The porters took the largest shelter and placed large tree frons all over the floor for padding. The kitchen was also set-up in this shelter. Our tents had been erected around the grassed area and as more trekkers and porters arrived more tents became available.



News arrived that two trekkers were doing it tough and were now sporting injuries that required them to be carried by the porters on stretchers the remaining distance in the dark through to camp. The furthest back was only just arriving into the last village about an hour away. The other trekker was struggling along through the creek crossings with badly blistered feet. With darkness all around us a second group of porters took off back from camp along the track to assist their mates with the carry-out.

The first trekker arrived surrounded by about 10 porters carrying him on a bush stretcher made from several tree branches, vines for ropes and the stretcher base and bed rolls for padding. The porters basically ran carrying him along the track crossing all the creek crossings with ease and came into camp faster than I did over the same distance. They are all truly remarkable and still carrying on their grand-fathers traditions. The second trekker came in about 10-20 minutes later again carried on a bush stretcher made from branches and vines. The speed they travelled was truly amazing. All in by 7pm. Very dark now.



Many of the porters ran with bare feet or thongs and I just couldn't imagine how sore their feet must be now having run over the terrain I earlier had carefully trekked over. With the Paramedics in the group a few decided to look at their injuries and help fix them up a little. The porters were proud and not keen to come forward until a few had, then the rest camp over for some attention. The difference in what we put up with and what they have to put up with is scary really. I am glad we were able to help those that wanted help. PS: nothing serious just some cuts, scratches, burns and lacerations.....



Dinner was already under way with our head cook porter stuck back along the track with the stretcher cases. With a general instruction to cook a curry using the rice and most food left over a few trekkers set about making something like a vegetable risotto. It was actually yummy and really good with most people having two helpings. The food was not needed after today except for lunch. We all pigged out and then the porters ate most of the remaining food planned for dinners that was left, they certainly deserved it.

Cooky slept in the same tent overnight with me and we both struggled to sleep in the hot and humid conditions amplified by the tent. I slept in shorts with no sleeping bag and still felt too hot. Most people went to bed pretty soon after dinner finishing what was a long hard, eventful day of trekking. I thought about tomorrow and the last big incline up to Imita Ridge, how would I go? I felt slightly better tonight but the cold didn't show any signs of going away, probably amplified by the tropical conditions and my body weakened by the strenuous exercise. Once again, I reminded myself I was not being shot at, it wasn't raining and I had eaten a great meal tonight - in stark contrast to the Diggers who fought along this track decades before me.

With the sound of the running water in the creek, the background jungle sounds of bugs, animals and birds shopping for dinner/breakfast, distant snoring and the quiet chit-chat of the porters, I dozed off to sleep gazing up at the brilliant stars out the door of the tent.

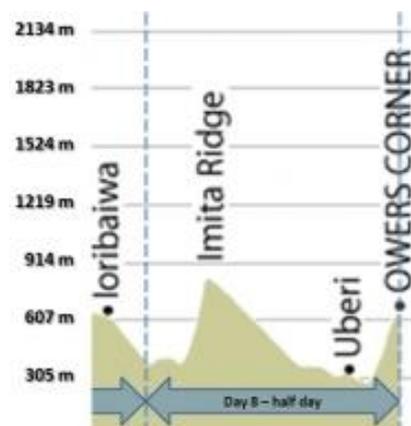
Day 8: Tue 2 Oct 07

Ua-Ule Creek to Ower's Corner

"Wakey wakey, hands off" was the cry early in the morning at 5:30am buy one of the trekkers who shall remain nameless, ok Gary. So up and at'em it was an early start on the last day of our trek. My tent partner Cooky was up early also packing and getting ready. The last day of packing all our smelly clothes, rolling our sleeping mats and stuffing our sleeping bags into their tiny carry bags. The porters were already up and had packed most of their cooking gear and other associated equipment. The load will be lighter for them today with the remaining food items eaten overnight.

I filled my water bladder and bottle from the creek. It will be a hot day today with no cloud cover and the sun was already pretty hot. I didn't have much breaky this morning still not feeling like much food. Checking my track map I reminded myself of the torture ahead with a monster hill first up. To take my mind off this hill I wondered over to see what the porters were doing.

The porters created new and improved stretchers for their two patients today in the tradition of the Fuzzy Wuzzys. I thought the ones they made yesterday were pretty good but obviously not. I was amazed to see how quickly and efficiently the porters set about creating the stretchers. Instead of ropes, vines were used



again and they really seemed to be pulling hard on them. They must be strong. Each stretcher had about four foam mats for padding which was great. Looking over at the two trekkers who will be carried on them you could see that they were a bit nervous and knowing both of them, probably pretty pissed at themselves that they need assistance again for the last day but understanding that it would be impossible otherwise.



Our exit out of camp was of course uphill and back into the jungle. The track proceeded to cross back over the creeks we crossed many times yesterday for the next 30-40 minutes with some very steep sections where everyone bunched up into single file and waited their turn to cross down or over the creek. I was feeling pretty good and made good progress along this section especially as we were out of the sun and it wasn't raining so the track was dry. The scenery was again spectacular with the lush green jungle crossing over the creeks which often formed small waterfalls.

Imita Ridge is known to be long and difficult climb with its relentless incline that goes for hours. The track is very steep in sections. It wasn't slippery or muddy like other parts of the Kokoda Track, just a rocky dirt track that snaked up the hill under the cover of the jungle canopy. Everyone found it very tiring and took rest breaks often during the long climb. The temperature was hot and I think I sweat out my last few kilos as I climbed this monster hill.



At a section of the climb that crossed a small creek the stretcher teams were resting. They had been ahead of me all the way having zoomed off earlier in the day. Porters were everywhere with the two stretchers positioned in the middle of a small open area next to the creek. As I arrived I sensed they were about to move off again so I thought I would head up the track quickly to take some photos.

The exit out of this rest area was very steep and took me several minutes just to climb the 30m out. In that time the first stretcher was picked up and moving rapidly up the hill towards me. The speed and efficiency of the porter team was amazing. About 10 porters were involved with each stretcher and they just pushed on upwards doing the same distance I did in five minutes in two or three.



I think the two patients would agree that their ride was pretty bumpy especially as some of the track they had to negotiate across is very steep and rocky making the ride a roller coaster like affair. Nevertheless the porters gently manoeuvred the stretchers along and zoomed up the hill past me and others on the track. I thought to myself I will see them at the end I bet way before my arrival.

Reaching the peak of Imita Ridge was an achievement and as I arrived I noticed just about everyone was there sitting around relaxing, including the two stretcher teams. The area was located in a saddle between two peaks with one side in the shade of a massive rock some 70-90m high and the other covered in shade by the tree canopy. Porters were everywhere and on this occasion it was easy to see just how huge our group was, over 100 people.



I found that climb really hard and spent the first 10 minutes just getting my breath back, eating some lollies and drinking more water with Gatorade in it. We could all smell the end of the track it was that close now. The excitement was clearly building. Whilst I was having the time of my life trekking I was also keen to finish. The last few trekkers trailed in over the next 30 minutes.

Our exit from Imita Ridge was literally over the other side and down about a distance two thirds the length of the incline up to the top of Imita Ridge. A section of this part of the track is called the Golden Staircase and during the war it was made up from 1000 stairs carved into the track with logs forming the steps to help prevent the slippery muddy track from sliding away under the constant foot traffic of soldiers. Today the steps are sort of visible but without logs or anything really making it obvious. In fact, it wasn't until I reached the bottom that I remembered the section I had just walked was indeed the Golden Staircase.

This section of the track was still steep but the track was pretty wide (3-6m) in most places and the undergrowth more open. The sun baked us in places as the tree canopy opened in sections. Near the bottom

where the slope lessens in incline we crossed a number of creeks and crossings that required careful rock hopping. I thought to myself this would have been a well trekked section of the track with everyone during the war making their way through here either injured or heading out to the front lines. Once again I wondered how many soldiers died along this track right here where I was and what the soldiers heading off into the mountains must have been thinking, what was the battle going to be like.

The track after the downhill section from the Golden Staircase changed to follow through the valley and head more towards the right along the ridge lines and dropped us out into a small village called Uberi. This village was pretty small and we mainly stopped here to fill up our water in the nearby creek and take a quick rest break.

To access the best water I followed several porters upstream negotiating several log crossings and over a number of big rocks to some rapids. I used my water bottle to fill up my water bladder and then the bottle itself. It takes one purification tablet to purify each litre of water so I popped in four tablets. I thought to myself this might be the last time for the trip with the river very close and the end not far away now.

I needed this rest stop feeling the heat over the last few hours. I sat under a tree and near a man with his son who had been out for a walk with his family. They had walked in from Ower's Corner and decided to take a rest also. We chatted for a while and then I decided to move on with the rest of the group who had started walking.

Leaving the village we crossed a creek which I initially thought was the Goldie River and found out it was not. The exit bank was steep and required some careful climbing using the roots to hang on. Moving out from the creek we crossed through a cleared area where the undergrowth had been removed and lots of large trees felled and removed. The track now flattened out and wiggled through the forest until we reached the river.

The Goldie River was an impressive sight. I could see some of the members of our group already swimming and having fun on the other side. The banks of the river had been washed away and only bare dirt was left. Trees and undergrowth had been washed away recently in a huge downpour which raised the river levels by 30m! Just imagining what the river would have looked like then was terrifying. The remains of a flying-fox were tangled in trees and bent out of shape on the far side. Only the concrete slab was left on the near side. I wasn't sure if we would have been using it, but if it existed still the crossing would have been awesome fun.



Upstream about 150m there was a log jam where the group was crossing. The river was about 25-30m wide here and the logs were creating a bridge but in about 6 sections, each requiring concentration to prevent a dip. The porters had rigged some ropes and were assisting all trekkers over the logs. I waited in line for my turn and quickly scooted over the logs keen for a break and swim on the other side. The bank was steep on both sides. I was pretty buggered now and very hot so a dip was essential to cool off.

Most of the trekkers had dumped their packs under the cover of the tree canopy at the far side of the cleared area. I dumped my pack and set off up the river bank to climb down again to the water, shoes off and in I went. It was so lovely and cool and the current was pretty strong. A few more trekkers were just arriving and walking upstream to the crossing. Josh our guide was monitoring the weather and indicated we needed to go as it was about to rain again. Right on time at around 2:30pm! I could set my watch by this rain.

So out I jumped, boots on, in a hurry to get back up to my pack and prepare for the last section of the track leading up to the finish. I really needed more time to relax but the rain started and most trekkers had set off already. At this stage I was feeling very tired and my cough was still bugging me terribly. The track wound through a section of jungle that crossed several creeks and had some steep sections in it until finally we could break single file and make for the top.

The final 200-300m of the track up to Ower's Corner is renowned for its killer last 200m where the track goes straight up a steep hill, in the open where it is hot, and seems to go on forever. I really struggled and after I discovered I was almost last I zoomed up past many people but at a price. I was stuffed again and had to stop often gasping for breath. I couldn't believe it, my last 200m and I was really hurting. My legs and knees were ok and I just struggled in the sun.

As my friends past me I was given words of encouragement and everyone was excited about reaching the end. I could see the long grass at the top but couldn't see the gate structure yet. Each switchback took ages to traverse and as I completed the last one I could see the large metal structure with the rising sun emblem perched on top. I looked back down the hill and could see the rest of the group slowly heading up but still some time off. It looked like some were pretty buggered and the two trekkers on stretchers were still on their way up.

Walking the remaining 30m was tough. I was emotional, probably a combination of the significance of finishing, the significance of the location and sheer exhaustion. I didn't know what I should do going through the middle of the structure so I just walked through and staggered to the left 5m and lay down crying. Looking around about two thirds of the group were through and chatting together, packs off and hugging etc.. I was not sure why I was so emotional but didn't care. I still had my pack on even so I must have looked hopeless.



A few of my close mates from the same SES Unit I belonged to came over and gave me a pat on the back and asked how I was. I didn't say much indicating how I was. I looked back at the structure seeing it in detail for the first time and decided I needed to pick myself up, take my pack off and savour the moment better. Whilst I did this the trekkers who were being carried on stretchers by porters were arriving. They dumped them before the structure and staggered through themselves. Well done I thought.

Ower's Corner was full. Another two trekking groups were there already preparing to set off waiting for our group to all exit the track before setting off themselves. I wondered what they must have been thinking looking at all of us arrive in the state we did, especially the three stretcher patients. The third person needed help up the last hill after suffering heat stroke or something similar at the bottom of the hill.



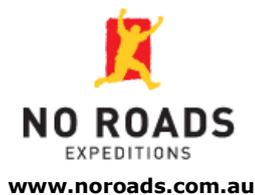
Three shelters around the edge of the knoll called Ower's Corner looked out over a formidable mountain range including to the right Imita Ridge. The mountains would have looked like a real challenge to anyone heading out along the track from here. A large Australian mountain gun was on display in a shelter in the centre of the knoll and each of the remaining shelters was being used by the trekking companies to prepare gear, food or supplies. No Roads had taken the centre one and I wandered over to see what was going on.



Food!! Yummy fresh hot chicken rolls for lunch with beer, soft drink and bottles of water. Heaven. Everyone sat around for 40 minutes or so and pigged out enjoying the food and rest. Photos of the trekkers and porters were organised and then a number of individual or small group shots were taken as the other trekking groups left to begin their adventure, all 96km of it.

I have written elsewhere on this website how I felt I performed and about other aspects of the track so I won't repeat that information here. I will say however that walking the track is an amazing and worthwhile adventure and something I will always remember. I will be back to do it again and hopefully with my wife (and son when he is older). It is something that should be nurtured, respected and the efforts of our soldiers and their PNG mates never forgotten.

Special thanks to:



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