

The Kokoda Track

By Greg Davies
The Association's Legal/Discipline Manager



I'm not entirely sure how this journey began. It may have been my interest in Australian military history; it may have been when former Senior Constable 28635 Phil Meaney mentioned that he wanted to walk the Track, or when my then 14 year old son, Brendan, said that he might like to come with us.

What we didn't realise was that, unless you have already walked the Track, nothing can prepare you for it. It is, without doubt, the most physically demanding and emotionally draining exercise I have undertaken – and everyone within our group agreed.

We were to embark upon a trek that had been undertaken exactly 64 years previously, by some of the bravest men that this country has

produced. Only through experiencing the terrain and the conditions can anyone gain even the remotest idea of what those men and boys endured.

Initially there had been only (about) 600 members of the 39th (Militia) Battalion – today's Army Reserve – against the 13,000 strong 144th South Seas Island Force of the Imperial Japanese Army. One can never remotely imagine how those men and boys whose average age was just 18 coped with the rigours of the Track, the lack of equipment and training and the fact that so many of the enemy were trying to kill them at every step of the way. While they were later bolstered by other Militia and the battle hardened men of the AIF their task was still something far beyond our understanding.

We commenced our journey at Ower's Corner, originally a plantation site, located about 30 kilometres from Port Moresby. On passing through the memorial gates the Track commences in earnest, with an almost vertical descent of half a kilometre to the Goldie River.

After wading through the river we learned to take off our hiking boots before wading through knee deep

water. The wet feet and boots lasted all day and did nothing to help foot soreness and the development of blisters, which are to be avoided at all costs – and we had another 180 river crossings to go!

Day one was a relatively easy day of about 5 hours hiking, from Ower's Corner, to Uberi (440 metres in height) over Imita Ridge (850 metres) down to Ua Ule Creek at 300 metres. The ups and downs don't end with the mountains and valleys – there are the hundreds of creeks and rivers that have their own 'downs' and exhausting 'ups' along the way.

The Track is very much as it was 64 years ago – no wider than four or five feet at its broadest and in parts as narrow as a hiking boot, while over the precipice is a potential downwards fall of several hundred metres.

The following days took us through villages and areas that have become famous with the deeds of the AIF and Australian Militia: Ioribaiwa Ridge, the Maguli Range, Nauro, Menari and Brigade Hill.

Brigade Hill is particularly emotional if you are aware of the deeds that were done by the 21st Brigade HQ Company – all the more

so as beneath you, on this small ridge about 80 metres long and 30 metres wide, are the remains of many of the brave diggers who formed part of the 1,000 strong force that repelled 6,000 infinitely better equipped enemy.

From Brigade Hill (1415 metres) we trekked through Efogi and the sheer vertical climb of Kagi, through (thankfully dry) swamp lands and thick tropical rain-forest. In each village we met with friendly locals who were happy to provide fresh fruit or cans of soft-drink cooled in large pots of creek water.

Beyond the Kagi Gap lay Myola 1 and Myola 2 – strange grassland areas where the rain-forest does not encroach. It was in these areas that the allies ‘biscuit bombed’ supplies to the troops by flying low and shoving everything out of open aircraft doors. This was a practice not without its’ dangers, and there are accounts of troops being killed by direct hits of supplies dumped from low flying aircraft.

While resting at the edge of Myola 2 I found a spent .303 cartridge, date stamped 1941. It remains there, resting in peace.

From Myola we passed through 1900 Camp (so named for its height) and over Mt. Bellamy, at two kilometres the highest point of the Owen Stanley Range. From here the view of the Kokoda Gap is visible, a gap in the range of several kilometres in width.

From there to Templeton’s Crossings, No. 1 and No.2, to Eora Creek, Alola and to Isurava. At Isurava we had the privilege to pay homage at the Memorial Site to the young men of Australia who, in the words of one, “Gave up their tomorrow’s for our today.” This is an extremely poignant setting and one in which valuable contributions were made to its construction by Inspector Wayne Rotherham, past Secretary of the 39th Battalion Association, who’s father fought on the Track in 1942.

From above the Memorial is a view of the Yodda Valley, stretching down to the township of Kokoda, hidden on our visit by banks of cloud. At sunset this magnificent

view stirs even the most blasé.

We then walked – mercifully gently downhill – to the villages of Deniki, Hoi and Kovello and into Kokoda itself (340 metres). In three days we had descended almost 1,700 ‘map’ metres, plus the ever present ups and downs and creek crossings along the way.

Brendan was asked by the trek leader to carry the Australian Flag into Kokoda and one of my proudest moments was watching him trek the final few kilometres into the grounds of the Kokoda Hospital with that beautiful flag held aloft.

On the Kokoda plateau, a single company of the 39th Battalion held off the full Japanese advance before retreating to Isurava. As with most of the Track, the weapon pits used by the diggers remain today and one can only imagine what it must have been like to crouch in the ground watching 13,000 enemy soldiers advance towards the position you and 180 mates were supposed to hold at all costs.

Everyone should be more aware of the story of the Kokoda Track, for if Gallipoli was the birth-place of our Nation, the Kokoda Track was where we came of age.

Participating in this coming of age were three men who eventually returned and joined the Victoria Police Force. They deserve their privacy, but I will briefly mention one story that illustrates the sort of man that made up that group of heroes.

My father (former Detective Sergeant Gomer Davies 12917) told me that when he first joined the Vice Squad in the early 1960s he

was introduced to a First Constable who was to be his boss.

This young man joined the 39th Battalion but was taken from the troop train at Sydney by the Military Police and returned to Melbourne. Apparently, his parents had caused something of an uproar when they rang to inquire where the Australian Army was taking their 16 year old son!

True to form, on his return to Melbourne he jumped back onto a Sydney bound train and rejoined the Battalion, with whom he served and fought throughout the New Guinea campaign.

If you are considering walking the Track, you will need to allow two weeks for travel to and from PNG and the hike itself. I heartily recommend a further week’s leave on your return to work out the pains and bruises as well as the swollen feet.

While on the Track I lost 6 kilos. Dehydration is a major problem for some trekkers, and is probably the greatest cause of medical evacuation (which has to be done by helicopter – when an available landing field can be found – at your own expense).

Lack of personal hygiene is the other major cause of illness. Most of the villages have open air cold (very cold) showers, but many of the camping areas require a bath in a very, very cold stream.

I am delighted that my trek is over but I am more delighted that I have done it.

This is something all Australians should do if they have the opportunity – what a wonderful alternative to ‘Schoolies Week’!



Greg Davies and his son Brendan on the Track