

Rob Rafterham

HIKING KOKODA FOR DAD AND PAT

Kanga Moore's letter came in early April 2007 proclaiming "You are No. 1 on the list and we would like your immediate acceptance". I'd put in a submission to the 39th for the inaugural "Adventure Kokoda" sponsored trip to New Guinea and was overwhelmed to hear the good news. The bad news came a week later when Kanga rang to say the paperwork is here and guess what "You are going on the 28th May".

Battle stations were quickly erected all around me, and my quest to get fit was on in earnest. Aged 54, with 5 weeks notice I had no choice. I went cold turkey on the beer, no junk food and then started walking or should I say climbing. A 40 kilometre hike at Wilson's Prom, an 8 hour endurance march up near Mt Buller in very wet and muddy conditions, a ride on a push bike (once) and countless walks around Arthurs Seat and the National Parks near home on the Mornington Peninsula.

I left for New Guinea in good stead.

I was met in Port Moresby by Chad Sherrin from Adventure Kokoda who was to be tour leader, along with three female nurses from NSW, a dairy farmer my age from Gippsland in Victoria, a young 23 year old bird from Tassie, and CPL Jeremy Lowe from the 39th Personal Support Battalion based at Randwick Barracks in NSW. Jeremy was selected to represent the new 39th and I was to represent the descendants of the original.

A nervous night packing and unpacking, little sleep then we were off up to Owers Corner. The heat was oppressive as we arrived for lunch and were met by our 26 porters (yes, believe it!). Jeremy and I decided to lug our own gear and the others carried day packs, a quick photo take then we all set off down toward Goldie River.

At our first campsite we were met by a typical Kokoda Track welcome, it came down in bucket loads, washing all our tents away and within minutes the creek rose dramatically. As fortune had it this was to be the only rain we would see for almost the whole ten days.

We were soon in a military style routine; reveille at 5.30 am sharp each day, then on the track marching by 7.30 am after a briefing on the day ahead.

I was now in the place my dad had been all those years ago. He was barely 19 when he disembarked from the "Aquitania" and set up camp with the mozzies in Port Moresby. Letters he sent home were only recently discovered (he died in 1992) and a few gems are included here with my hike diary.

January 1942 "Port Moresby is very small all the white women have been evacuated. Prices are terrible 1/- for Life Buoy soap! Tell Granpa I will stake a gold claim in New Guinea."

I climbed the ridges of Imita and Ioribaiwa with difficulty and after watching the porters I soon learned to take short steps when going downhill to avoid jarring to my knees. Within a few days I was walking like a chinaman? Being in the jungle taking one step at a time gives you plenty of time to think, the group would soon spread out to each one's own pace, so I had a cry now and then and thought of my dad and family.

February 1942 *"We have coconuts in the camp. We used to shoot them down with our rifles but that did not last long as we were using too much ammunition!"*

By Day 4 one of our nurses was having foot problems causing her to arrive (with the help of 3 porters) at Menari Village very tired and sore at 10.30 pm. Sylvia's spirits were high but Chad was preparing to tell her that she could not go on. The next day we left leaving her behind to wait for a helicopter which would collect her in a day's time. This was a sad time for all of us. We were soon at Brigade Hill and a battle site briefing about the poor old 2/14th and others and their brave fight further saddened us, so we all decided to stick together then proceeded to Efogi Village.

May 1942 *"The R.C. Padre was in one of our dugouts the other day. He was standing with his head out giving us a running description when he heard the bombs hissing down and said 'righto boys duck your heads'! He is a decent chap".*

Some of our hardest and most treacherous climbs and falls are in this area. Just before nightfall Anna from Tassie 'hit the wall'. The climbing pain finally took its toll as she burst into tears proclaiming that she would forever respect the diggers for what they did. I agreed with tears in my eyes.

The next morning we passed through Naduri Village and met Ovuri Indiki, the 102 year old Fuzzy Wuzzy angel. We were lucky as this day was his Sabbath, but he and his sons made us very welcome. We continued up then entered the moss forest as we ventured to Myola Lakes. These lakes are spectacular. Where the jungle stops abruptly to open up to grassland is straight out of Jurassic Park. Exposed weapon pits and a half exploded bomb made interesting viewing here along with Chad's narrative about the wartime use for supply drops into Myola. That night at Camp 1900 (1900 metres above sea level) Chad and I had a skinny dip in the coldest water said to be along the track. Spirits were high again for we were almost at the highest point of the track.

May 1942 *"We still have our cocky here. He was bombed out of his home. He can't talk much, just as well he would pick up some choice language in a military camp!"*

On Day 7, a Sunday, we finally reached Mt Bellamy. At 2200 metres this is the highest point along the track. We conducted a simple service here where I dedicated the young spirit of my only son Patrick (who passed away aged 19 in 2006). I asked him to visit here and look after the young men from both sides who still lie on the jungle floor, 65 years after their battles. I finished by saying "Youth is like diamonds in the sun, and diamonds are forever. God speed Paddy".

Chad was now calling the terrain ahead "speed humps" instead of mountains so onward we trundled forever northward, past Templeton's Crossing and onto Eora Creek where I stood on the head of a "Papuan Black", a most poisonous snake. My porter named "Patrick" was behind me and he and his mate were able to knock it away from me and dispose of it. A guardian angel? Before we left Eora we crossed the creek and ascended the hill to see Jap positions that reigned down havoc on the poor wounded that could not get out of here.

We left the Kokoda Trail after lunch and scrambled over a little used track to Abuari Village which is directly opposite the vast Yodda Valley from Isurava. At 5 pm the mountain mist came in with a vengeance. Just prior to this Chad gave us a detailed briefing on the battles on both sides of the valley that led up to what happened at Isurava. Chad (who was a major in the army for 20 years) would lay out on the ground a map made of rocks, flowers, vines and scratchings in the dirt to explain the battle. His passion for the history of what happened was brought to life excellently. At the end of the briefing he would ask CPL Jeremy to "Eat that plan corporal" (in other words destroy it). This was very funny.

The elder at this village is Naden Lovei a quiet gentleman, but progressive in his thinking for the future of his village. I was later surprised to see him at Kokoda airstrip (2 day walk) to say goodbye to us. A nice gesture I won't forget. I'd also recommend to anyone to go over to Abuari.

*June 1942 " We will have the Japs beaten in 6 months and be home for Xmas. We are all dug in and waiting for the little yellow rats and I tell you they will get a hostile time if they ever get here.
Love Bob"*

After a beautiful pink sunrise we began the descent then rigorous climb across the valley to Isurava. Some people say you should hike from North to South to understand the battles in their order but I can tell you that on arriving in Isurava to find what a wonderful and spiritual place this is I'm glad I came from the south. We had 8 days to look forward to this and we were not let down.

We were blessed with warm afternoon sunshine and were able to sit and take in the view of the escarpment beyond the memorial. You have to see it! After settling in we walked up the hill to the old garden and "B" positions where Chad talked of the battle and put it all in perspective. By the way Chad is also a poet and the wartime poems by diggers themselves rolled off his lips with enthusiasm.

That night we sat by the fire and listened to the porters practice their national anthem and another song called "Coming Home" which they were preparing for our dawn service at 5.30 am the next day.

Our dawn service included me reciting the poem "Those Ragged Bloody Heroes" on behalf of the 39th and Russell a poem from the 2/14 for his dad. We sang our anthem and then the porters sang theirs. I would heartily recommend to anyone to hear the Papuan National anthem.

We left Isurava in heavy rain, quickly descending the valley toward Kokoda. This was an eerie experience "the stillness after the storm" for we knew we had left a special place. A lunch at Hoi Village, then forever downward suddenly realizing we were now back in the humid hot. Surprisingly, the long march on the flat through the old rubber plantation seemed to test the knees like never before. Soon Chad was to exclaim "You boys from the 39th and 2/14th please lead this outfit into Kokoda!" All of a sudden there was an extra spring in our tired legs as we marched so tall and proud into the village. That night I was able to procure a "South Pacific Lager" or 3 and while it is an acquired taste, I can assure you the first one tasted like mother's milk. A quiet night followed with thanks all round to our porters and Chad.

The next morning we marched to Kokoda airfield then waited 2½ hours for the plane to come after the mist cleared. In the meantime, we had to weigh all 26 porters and their packs. It was quite funny as most of them had procured some “Betel nut” during the night and were all “happy as larry”.

Back at Moresby we went straight to Bomana Cemetery where I was given the privilege of placing a poppy on the grave of Colonel William Owen. I had to find him, Grave C6E4. As I looked over the graves of 3800 young men I thought of my dad who turned 20 the day after Isurava on the 31st August 1942 and come home to raise seven sons. I thought I’d place a poppy on the grave of a lad the same age who did not come home and as I looked around for awhile, three rows here, another three rows there I finished back where I started and behold there was the grave of Alf Russell, 39th Battalion, died 30/8/1942 aged 20 and right next to Colonel Owen.

That was a defining moment of my trip, a colonel and a private buried next to each other as mates, the Kokoda Spirit. Gee, I’d like to know more about that Russell bloke.

After 10 days carrying three loads on my shoulders, my 19 year old dad, my 19 year old son and of course my pack full of wet clothes and plastic bags I can’t finish without giving everyone my praise for the fine effort done by “Adventure Kokoda”. Chad said Charlie Lynn is a generous man, I tip my hat to him. 3 cheers and Bravo.

July 1943 “I’m in the A.I.F. now, I don’t want to come home a ‘chocko’. They call us ‘rainbows’ now – come in when the storm is over! What do you think of that? It is the ones that are still at home that call us that”.

By the way I wore my Scout scarf for the whole ten days (it nearly walked out of the jungle on its own). Scouting worldwide is 100 years old this year and 28 million Scouts are celebrating. On my trip I met Scouts from England, Ireland and around Australia and even three of our porters were Scouts.

People ask me did I get a feel for how the diggers coped. I could never ever do that by just being there. Their darkness, poor equipment, no sleep or food let alone the Japs, but I can tell you one thing, a way to really feel Kokoda is to speak to one of those diggers that are left. I encourage everyone. My chats with Kanga Moore are special and will always be treasured. To see his eyes swell up to talk about those who didn’t make it is very moving.

Italics are extracts from letters home to Australia from Private Ronald “Bob” Rotherham V185338 HQ Co 39th Battalion, who like most of his mates transferred to the 2/2nd and then served in the north at Buna and Gona. He served 597 days in New Guinea.

Rob Rotherham

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