



THE MAGNIFICENT ATHERTON TABLELANDS



Twelve months had gone quickly since I hiked Kokoda as the 39th's first "Adventure Kokoda Trek" recipient, gratefully provided to the association by Charlie and Jill Lynn, and now here I was embarking with my wife Jean from Cairns driving south towards Innisfail enroute to the Atherton Tablelands. This was to be my next pilgrimage to seek out more knowledge and understanding of the war my 'choko' Dad never told me about.

Things got off to a bumpy start as I became ill and finished up in Innisfail Hospital. On sighting a rash on my lower leg the doctor asked about its' origin. I explained to him that the week before I had been caving at Portland in Victoria's far southwest with my Venturer Scouts and the rash was what was left after a leech had had his fill of my blood and moved on. (I saw 1 leech in the whole 10 days of my Kokoda hike) I was to find out that its' infection was attacking the lymph nodes in my groin. The doctor gave me a week's supply of penicillin and sent me on my way.

Climbing the rainforest we entered the Tablelands from the south, to a land of waterfalls and explored the dairy and timber industries, then finished up at Atherton for a couple of nights. Our first bit of wartime interest came in finding out this area was the world's first tropical dairying area and that its operations were revolutionized when the Yanks came during the war demanding "pasteurised" milk. During 1943-45 the entire Atherton Tablelands became the largest military base in Australia hosting between 100,000 and 300,000 troops from 140 different units. General Blamey had chosen the area in 1942 as a forward staging, training and rehabilitation base because of its closeness to the jungles of the north but with its cooler temperatures at higher altitude from the coast. The area was also well served by the railway for his troop trains.



At Tolga and the Rocky Creek War Memorial Park we can report that the 39th's plaque is in fine fettle. If anyone's ever up there, cross the highway on the road up past the old igloo, over the railway line for a couple of hundred metres and there on the right you'll come across the concrete pads of the hospitals which have recently been cleared. These are quite impressive showing the layout of wards, corridors, nurses' stations, latrines, etc.

We journeyed over to Tinnaroo and sighted the many camps that were along the Barron River, not much trace left but plenty of signs. Across the river where the bush became dense rainforest at Danbulla, one of the original army igloos from there was transferred to

Malanda (south a bit in the dairy area) and we visited it. It now has a new life as the Malanda Show Pavilion.

Back at Atherton we admired the "Barron Valley Hotel" which was the official Officers Mess during the war, then visited and paused to respect the 155 lads who peacefully lay in the Atherton War Graves Cemetery. So sad to think those young men came home from so far away and nearly made it.

We enjoyed Devonshire tea at Lake Barrine Boathouse, which is positioned amongst beautiful gardens inside an extinct volcanic crater full of water. It was seconded as a convalescence home during the war and there are two 1000 year old giant kauri pines right at its doorstep. Many a recovering digger would have inspected their magnificence.

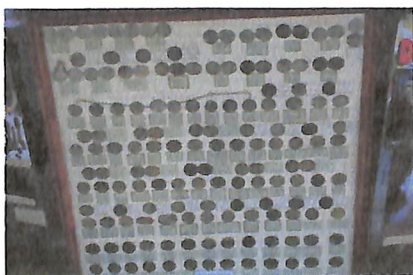
The next day with Jean in complete charge of transportation and provisions, (I was still feeling a bit ordinary) we headed further up the ranges and over to Herberton where we booked into the "Royal Hotel" (Queensland's longest continuously licensed hotel) and sat down for a quiet one. This was the first time on my trip I paused to think of my Dad and wondered if he had had the chance to have an ale here as Wondecla was just down the road. I suppose we'll never know now. Just along the road from here a low railway bridge has been removed (would you believe so "tourist coaches" can use the area). This was ironic because the rail journey up to Wondecla from Cairns would be one of the most spectacular tourism journeys in Australia.



At Wondecla we explored north, south, east and west from the old igloo eventually finding the original campsite of the 2/2nd where our boys were disbanded. It's now an avocado farm and while we were there a young mother with her children came along asking if we needed help. She was genuinely interested to know we were "family" and told us this was the 6th Division area.



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The end of the railway was about half an hour further south at Ravenshoe. On the Saturday we were able to attend the opening and commemoration of a Heritage Walk at the Millstream Falls National Park. The Queensland Minister for Sustainability was there amongst wartime dignitaries, the 51st Cairns Army Regiment, Nato's and a magnificent display of wartime artefacts and memorabilia that had been found throughout the Tablelands. Dog tags,

bayonets, ordinance, shrapnel, and all types of things were on display.

The army staff showed me one of "Lady Blamey's" glasses they had found. Our veterans will recall, it was she, wife of General Blamey, who showed soldiers how to wrap cloth or rope around the neck of a bottle, douse it in kero, heat it up, then immerse it in cold water which would 'snap' the neck off resulting in a pretty fair beer glass.





Millstream Falls is the widest natural waterfall in Australia and the park is the oldest in north Queensland, so it was apt to celebrate 100 years of National Parks in Queensland at this site and also very warming to see the wartime heritage perpetuated as well. The Heritage Walk has uncovered relics from the past and has interpretive signs along its way with some memories on the plaques written by boys from the 2/14. It was good to see Brownlow

Medallist Malcolm Blight there too paying his respects as well as a flyover of a WWII Harvard Warbird.

I ran into Matt Power (2/14, yes still with that bullet in his back) and his wife and he explained that the 2/14 had rested at Millstream after Kokoda and prior to returning to PNG. The whole escarpment looks down on a picture card gorge where most infantry units had their own "swimming holes", bar one spot where practice ordinance was fired into the valley below (hopefully straight).



I said to Matt that while this area was a top spot, it must have been a sad time for the remnants of the 2/14. He agreed with head bowed. I then reinforced to him that the 39th were and still are very proud of "the boys of the 2/14th". Matt replied simply "the gallant 39th".



On returning to Atherton we visited the new tourist information centre and I was amazed to discover how little information there was available for anyone to do a recon of the area like us. All I found was a faded photocopied couple of sheets of old maps with sites roughly marked that you could hardly read, and on top of that it cost a lousy five dollars. Perhaps our colleagues in the north could moot some push to Vet's Affairs or Queensland

government to get the Tablelands more approachable (wartime wise) for our next and younger generations. The only other place we were told to find war history was the Tolga Railway Station Museum but this was closed the whole time we were there (including Saturday and Sunday).

Our visit to the Tablelands was a very moving and rewarding experience, also to for Jean as her Dad was up there with the 2/7th. I'll go back again for sure.

One interesting observation I made up there was while sighting every bend, siding, station and tunnel along the railway I felt that this was actual living wartime history and I could picture my Dad and his mates anywhere along its path. Landscapes change, buildings are gone but the rusty rails are still there. I stood on Atherton Rail Station and pictured my Dad standing next to me. Sadly, I'd like to advise everyone that bar one small section the railway is abandoned and deteriorating fast.



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