

A KOKODA TRACK REFLECTION

Sitting in the mid morning sun at Kokoda Village airstrip there was a feeling of anti-climax in the air. A couple of hours had been spent waiting for the valley fringe cloud and fog to lift. This was needed to allow a charter flight to land on the grass runway and whisk us away to Port Moresby. The couple of hours spent sitting at the airstrip was the longest sit down we had experienced in nine days of trekking the Kokoda Track.

We had spent the previous night in an open bungalow at Kokoda and had celebrated my plumber mate Rod's fourtysixth birthday. We were lucky enough to do this with a copious amount of cold South Pacific Lager stubbies – thanks to the local Chinese owned store. The PNG stores had the lager but it was hot. They have not yet cottoned on to the fact that down south they like their beer cold. No worries with the Chinese though – they will sell you anything just how you want it!

At the airstrip this morning a lot of the recently identified national pass time was being undertaken – a lot of standing around staring together with, more often than not, beetle nut chewing. Not a lot of work seems to get done in PNG – in reality you seldom observe work being done. The Country celebrated independence from Australia during our walk and my down to earth mate quipped that they are supposed to celebrate going forward not backwards. This may sound unfair but you ask any long term expat and that is the answer you will get – it's a shame really.

I need to quickly point out, however, that the twenty six locals who carried our food and gear over the Ranges spent nine of the hardest working days I have ever evidenced – and the fourteen of us (Australian trekkers) all agreed on this fact. The porters earned their money and by all accounts it is good money. They are treated like royalty in the villages along the track – it is a big deal to be as a porter for a Kokoda Track walk. The boys were all getting subsequent flights back to Moresby on this day and quite a number of them were setting off on another nine day trek later in the week. Unbelievable!



I earlier mentioned a feeling of anti-climax but perhaps this was residual to the previous nights birthday celebrations. Any such feeling disappeared as the twin prop charter climbed steeply from the grass runway steadily gaining altitude to raise over the Ranges. It is a twenty five minute flight back to Moresby almost directly over the route of the Kokoda Track - which had taken nine days to walk.

The enormity of the trek was now laid out only a few hundred metres below us as the charter whined its way over the mountains. The feeling of anti-climax changed to one of exhilaration at the recognition of the terrain and the route of the Track below us. It is a big deal to walk this track and it is definitely no easy task. Hence a day of celebration in the Royal Papuan Yacht Club ensued.

Two factors are now etched uppermost in my brain as a result of this walk. The first is the Track itself which has apparently existed for centuries. It is narrow, it is wide, it is bloody treacherously steep, it is dry, it is deep in mud, it is held together by rainforest tree roots but it is mostly a HIGHWAY. At a ten minute break from walking one day I said to the plumber – “Rod how long do you think this track would take to grow over in this jungle?” Typically Rod replied “..... if I know mate.” I posed the question to Darcey, Thomas and Pooksie the nearest porters. It took them ten minutes to get their heads around the question and they then answered only a matter of weeks. What was posing them the problem was “why would this stupid Australian ask such a question”. This is our highway, it has existed for centuries and it is our

only affordable means of transport from one side of the island to the other. Once you realize this then you really come to terms with the Track.



If you as a reader are having troubles in understanding here, let me try and explain further. At one point on the Maguli Range our crew was passed by ten or fifteen locals heading in the other direction. They were spread out over the track by three or four hundred metres. A couple of the blokes in the middle had football boots strung around their necks. In my exhaustion I thought they must save the boots with sprigs for some of the sloppy slippery sections of the track – and then I didn't give it another thought. At our next water break an hour later word passed around that the ten or fifteen locals were walking to Moresby for a touch football tournament – they had come from Popondetta and still had fifty kilometers of track to walk. Too bad if a river had swollen – but how else were they going to participate in the competition. The simple fact is they had to hoof it and that meant walking the Track.

The other startling fact that became clear to me was the relatively short length of the intense combat campaign with the Japanese. I and many of my co-trekkers were very surprised to be informed by the terrific memorial established at Isurava that the main combat took place in a bit over a month in August – September 1942. I was continuously astounded at Brigade Hill and Isurava when it was pointed out how the Japanese would outflank the Diggers – impossible would be my reply when you actually view the topography and vegetation and combine this with monsoonal rain and the intense black of the night. How could the Japanese do it? But they did and this made me realize how resourceful and courageous they must have been in their warfare.

On further ponderance of this situation, ones admiration for the Diggers increases. Somehow, the Australians, with the assistance of their Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels and some air support from the Yanks were able to overcome this resourcefulness and courageousness and achieve a Kokoda Track victory. The enormity of this victory will never be known other than hypothetically – what would have become of us if the Japanese had succeeded?

Our walk between the 10th and 29th of September, 2007 coincided with the main combat period and Rod and I were very proud to have achieved our own goal in this period.

The Kokoda Track is one of the great walks and one that should be experienced in a lifetime.

