



## Kevin Martin's Kokoda Track Challenge for Lifeline

I have just returned from a visit to New Guinea where I managed to walk the iconic Kokoda Track. WOW!!! What A challenge!!! Four things stood out for me on this trek.

Firstly, there was the physical aspect — 96 kms of continual long climbs and descents, ranging from steep to very steep to near vertical (literally). In addition, there was constant slippery or thick oozing mud, high heat and humidity, tropical downpours and dense jungle. The scenery was superb but to enjoy it we had to stop walking so we could lift our eyes and concentration off where our next step was best to land. Each time our foot did land, we didn't know whether it would stick or which way it would slide. Despite all of us having many big stacks and most copping some minor injuries or having some challenging times, the whole team of 13 made it through to the finish as a collective group. It was an achievement and a memory to cherish for a lifetime.

What gave real meaning to the whole trek was that we were retracing the steps of the Australian soldiers who were defending our country from the Japanese attempted invasion back in World War II. A rag tag grouping of civilian soldiers, experienced only in desert fighting, they were rushed in to front an enemy of much greater numbers, superior armaments and with extensive jungle warfare experience. After almost a year of bitter fighting under appalling conditions our soldiers finally prevailed and Australia was saved from almost certain invasion. We visited the Australian War Cemetery at Bomona on the way to the start of the Track, had a beautiful Anzac Day Dawn Service at the Australian War Memorial on Brigade Hill, the site of one of the intense battles, and on the final day we had time to contemplate the epic Battle of Isurava Ridge at the Australian Memorial there. Four huge polished granite blocks bearing the inscriptions **COURAGE**, **ENDURANCE**, **MATESHIP** and **SACRIFICE** epitomised the spirit of our forces. It was a highly emotional experience for us all and gave a clear perspective for the Track and our Challenge.

Along the way we met up with the people (sedentary subsistence farmers) from the isolated villages. What were traditionally warring tribes of head hunters have now become friendly, peaceful and beautiful people. Joe, the respected elder from the village of Naduri, explained how their predecessors had negotiated an enduring peace to end centuries of warfare and killings, leading to the current situation of mutual acceptance and respect. If these so called "primitive tribes" can achieve this, why do the leaders of the so called advanced nations fail so miserably? Greed, stupidity and lack of respect for human dignity dominate our agendas. Joe also stressed the high respect the PNG people have for the support and assistance from Australia and the importance of maintaining that mutual regard.

Finally, the real purpose of this Challenge was to support LIFELINE in the essential service they provide to the community in depression counselling and suicide prevention. A total of almost \$150 000 has been raised by this Kokoda exercise. Of particular note was the role played by the Insurance Australia Group, who encouraged, supported and subsidised ten of their employees from across the country to participate as part of a team building activity. That was an outstanding success which reflected in a very comfortable and supportive spirit within the walking team, especially with the three "outsider freelance" entrants being warmly included.

Just as the Australian soldiers in World War II relied heavily on the support of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels for their success 74 years ago, so we, the descendants of the soldiers, also relied heavily on the descendants of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels for our survival. Clearly the soldiers would not have succeeded without their backing, and the same applied for us. They shadowed our every step and many times I felt my back pack "mysteriously" moving ahead or pulling back or going sideways as I started slipping out of control. They did so much to make our walk easier (ie less impossible) and they were great company as well.

Our other critical member was Tom-Tom, our trek leader from Back Track Adventures. By nature a happy larrikin with a jovial sense of humour, he was in full control when any difficult issues arose. He is a keen student of the history and events of the war within PNG and he outlined it all to us with great passion and emotion. Our enjoyment during those 11 days was largely the result of Tom-Tom's professionalism.

I set out on this trek with the principle aim of proving that, at the age of 69, I could still prevail over the challenges involved. However the overall experience was much broader and more profound than that. It revolved around the team spirit and the courage, endurance and mateship we shared. It was an honour for me to be a part of that team.

**LEST WE FORGET**