



Kokoda blazes a trail for AFP leadership

By Richard Terry

The wartime history of the Kokoda Track provides a dynamic backdrop for developing leadership capabilities to meet today's challenging environment. In particular, much can be drawn from the leadership example of Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Honner who commanded Australian forces in the battle for Isurava on the Kokoda Track in August 1942.

In 2006 it was proposed that the hardships of Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Kokoda Track could be tailored into a leadership exercise for the AFP. It was envisaged that the exercise would present 'hands-on', 'problem-based' leadership challenges for emerging leaders and at the same time increase community engagement with young people who have little or no positive exposure to the AFP.

The submission became a reality following the death of AFP members Mark Scott and Brice Steele in a plane crash at Yogyakarta,

Indonesia, in March 2007. Mark had always wanted to walk the track with his 16-year-old son James. The AFP picked up Mark's legacy and, in line with the community engagement aims of the leadership submission, James was invited to join an AFP scoping study led by Federal Agent Richard Terry.

In June 2008 a team of five set out to assess the value of instigating a Kokoda outdoor leadership activity that would complement the AFP's formal academic leadership programs. Federal Agent Terry, a former Liaison Officer to Port Moresby, was joined by Commander Peter Wood (Manager Learning and Development), Petra Crowe and Mick Mackell (Heath and Fitness) and James Scott.

In assessing the learning opportunities presented by this experiential, cross-cultural challenge, it was found to be:

- an exercise in event planning requiring

concise and considered logistical skills

- a leadership experience in a challenging real-world environment
- a mentoring and development opportunity for Commander Wood as a member of the AFP Executive
- an opportunity for people to gain an insight into their own physical and mental limitations and those of others—linked to the AFP fitness standards, and
- a chance to involve a member of an important community group that the AFP is seeking to engage with, namely youth.

Left page: The Isurava Memorial was opened in 2003 by then Prime Minister John Howard and PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare. It recognises the Kokoda Track campaign of August–November 1942, and the enormous hardships and tremendous sacrifices made on the Kokoda Track.



The Commissioner and James Scott take a five-minute break on day one.



As the expedition coincided with a trip to PNG for meetings with the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, Commissioner Keelty and Federal Agent Kellie Steele joined the group on the first day.

The trek

The 96-kilometre walking track between Kokoda and Owers Corner is regarded as one of the toughest treks in the world. The endless climbs and almost vertical declines are made more difficult with temperatures in the mid-thirties and regular afternoon downpours. The first day between Kokoda and Isurava is particularly steep so when the group arrived at Isurava Memorial at 5 pm, many had reached the limits of their physical endurance. Any thoughts of sitting around the campfire were quickly doused by an urgent need for sleep as the sun went down.

The following morning the Commissioner and the group discussed the leadership challenges faced by Lt Col Honner in August 1942. At the time that Honner took over command, the Australian troops were

exhausted both physically and mentally. Those not wounded or in ill health from tropical disease were hungry and cold due to the constant heavy rain.

While we view history today knowing the outcome, at that time Australia was fighting for its survival. The undefeated, well-equipped Japanese army was sweeping all before it. At Isurava the Australians faced a fanatical, well-disciplined enemy that outnumbered them 10 to 1.

Honner was a gifted leader and highly respected having won the Military Cross in Crete, and in turn he respected his troops. Honner believed the key to good leadership was instilling confidence in your troops. Having chosen Isurava as a good defensive position, he strategically placed his troops using the rugged jungle and almost sheer cliffs to maximum effect.

Honner inspired his men as the Japanese made frequent attacks, supported with heavy machine guns. After two days the 2/14th battalion arrived and the 39th was ordered to withdraw.

The soldiers however refused to leave their mates and only the most serious stretcher cases were evacuated. There were many acts of bravery, some reported and others not. The first Victoria Cross of the Pacific campaigns was won by Bruce Steel Kingsbury at Isurava.

History tells us that the defence of Isurava and later battles on Brigade Hill held the enemy long enough to weaken their resources and to enable the Australians to counter and defeat the Japanese. The Kokoda Track remains dotted with relics and reminders of the battles including weapons pits, observation trenches and rusted weapons.

Above: The trekking group at the township of Kokoda. The town was established in 1904 as a government station to support gold mining in the Yodda Valley. That year Captain Francis Barton travelled from Port Moresby, Bomana, Sogeri, Uberi, Naro, Menari, Kagi and onto Kokoda, opening an overland mail route that became the Kokoda Track. (From left: Petra Crowe, Richard Terry, Mick Mackell, Peter Wood, Commissioner Keelty, James Scott and Kellie Steele.)



Commander Peter Wood and Petra Crowe test their health and fitness walking into Naoro Village at the end of day four.

The five-day trek contained many highlights—creek crossings, climbing Mt Bellamy, meeting with locals at the villages and the final climb into Owers Corner. Importantly, the expedition offered time to reflect on the events in 1942, leadership and self-evaluation. Serious physical challenges added another dimension, requiring everyone to prepare both physically and mentally. Success depended on the group working together, providing mutual support, encouragement and at times humour.

Every person experienced some difficulty at some stage as the heat, hills and or heavy packs took their toll. Nevertheless, the trek was an opportunity to draw on others' strengths as individuals were taken out of their comfort zones and confronted by unique challenges. It highlighted the need to learn, understand and respect the immediate environment in an unforgiving foreign landscape.

The AFP is examining the feasibility of future expeditions incorporating lessons learnt from this pilot program.

The trek was an opportunity for reflection and skill development mirroring many aspects common to all leadership challenges. It also provided a focus on health and fitness with links to the AFP's fitness standards and reinforced the need for good nutrition.

The degree of satisfaction (relief) of finishing the Kokoda Track and sense of achievement it inspires is an individual thing, but the desire for sleeping in a bed, eating real food and relishing an ice cold beverage is common to most that finish.

Anyone who has a desire to test and gain a greater understanding of themselves, Australian history and leadership should look at the Kokoda Track as a unique learning ground.

On his return, James Scott, a Year 10 boarder at Canberra Boys Grammar, said: "The greatest value of the trek was seeing the Kokoda track first-hand and experiencing both a physical and emotional connection to the events of 1942."



The group negotiates Templeton Crossings.

References

1. Brune P (1991) *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes*, Allen and Unwin Pty Ltd, Sydney.
2. Hawthorne, S (2003) *The Kokoda Trail A History*, Central Queensland University Press, Queensland.
3. Lindsay, P (2002) *The Spirit of Kokoda – Then and Now*, Hardie Grant Books, Victoria.