

In their footsteps

75th anniversary of Kokoda

On the 75th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign, *David Howell* led a group of Australians to walk in the footsteps of the first Australian soldiers who marched the Kokoda Track in 1942.

This year, I had the privilege of leading a group of 14 dedicated Australians on a unique trek along the Kokoda Track to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Kokoda campaign. Participants each took on the name of a Digger from B Company, donned the uniform of the time – including leather Army boots and the iconic slouch hat – and retraced the original trek. In doing so, we gained a greater understanding of what these men went through and we honoured their memory in a special way.

B Company of the 39th Australian Infantry Battalion set off on the Kokoda Track in early July 1942. Thrown together in a hurry, they were ordered to make their way via the Owen Stanley Range and secure the vital airstrip located at the village of Kokoda. B Company's move was a preliminary one, to support General Douglas MacArthur's plan to build forward airbases on the north coast of Papua. The Japanese were yet to start their invasion.

Private Cec Driscoll, aged 21, from Mildura, was a C Company man who volunteered to go to Kokoda. "I was sick of hanging around, running out signal wire and waiting to be bombed by the Japs, so the move to B Company seemed like a good one at the time," said Cec, who recalls meeting the challenge with both trepidation and a sense of adventure.

Re-enactment of the original B Coy photo that was taken by PJ McDonald.

The 39th was made up of many young lads with similar stories. They were led by a handful of older soldiers, including World War I veteran Captain Sam Templeton.

Our group of travellers was not too dissimilar in age or experience, including some young men still at school and some older men who had previously been to war. Queenslander Karl Turvey, who is a Captain in the Australian Army, played the part of Cec. He embraced the role and was lucky to be able to chat to Cec on the phone before the trip, who shared many colourful stories about the original trek.



B Coy set off from McDonald's Corner on 7 July 1942.
PHOTO: COURTESY CARL JOHNSTONE



Trekkers coming to terms with the hard leather boots.

As I was leading the group, I represented B Company's skipper, Captain Sam Templeton. However, unlike Templeton, or the other 13 men whom our group represented, I wouldn't be caught in a struggle for survival.

Preparations for our trip included hunting for vintage safety-razors, period toothbrushes and other authentic accoutrements. Replica leather army boots were sent to us months in advance, so we could break them in. We were issued with a set of webbing, a bedroll and a large webbed pack. The webbing comprised a water canteen, bayonet, two front utility pouches and a small haversack all held together by a belt and cross-straps. The haversack carried a wool jumper, a small towel, mess tins, foot powder, spare socks and a rain cape. Other gear such as a spare uniform, toiletries, boot polish and rations, were wrapped up inside a grey woollen blanket before being placed inside the large pack.

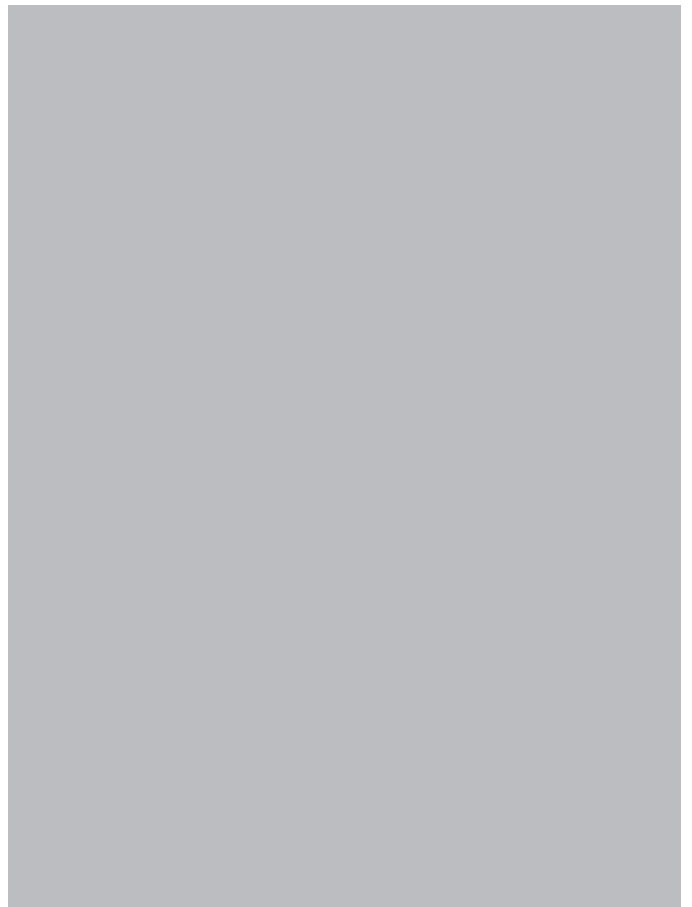
We wore Khaki Drill (KD) shorts and shirt, boots, socks to the knees and wool puttees, as well as the slouch hat with its oval red and brown colour patch. Each of us carried a MkIII Lee Enfield .303 rifle, rations, personal items and water-filled canteens, in total weighing about 20 kg. We also wore dog tags around our necks, for the soldier whom we represented and as a reminder to help us keep going.



Some of the volunteer carriers.



Jarod Copey and Mehdi Ahmad.





Our group was privileged to have volunteer carriers, local Koiari and Oro Kaiva people, who live along the Kokoda Track. They carried the group's stores in string bilum bags hung from a large branch that rested on the shoulders of two men, one walking behind the other. It was amazing to see these men take pride in living up to their forbears, the iconic Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels.

Our route was based on the diary of Jack Wilkinson, who was the medic attached to B Company at the time of their crossing. He detailed where they stayed, what they ate and how they fared on their trek. They set off on 7 July 1942, rested one day along the way, and arrived at Kokoda on 15 July. Each day, we checked our progress against the diary. The time frame in which B Company marched to Kokoda was very different than a modern-day trek.

Our first night at Uberi was something of a reality shock. We were tired and wet from a river crossing and one of our party was ill from food poisoning (he later had to be evacuated out). Preparing for camp included changing our daytime uniform

Crossing the Goldie River.

and putting on night-time attire (KD trousers and a clean shirt); unrolling a ground sheet and placing a woollen blanket on top; and finding branches to use with two rain capes to create an A-frame shelter.

Evening meals consisted of a type of stew (fried onion, carrot, potato, bully beef, water and Oxo cubes), black tea and bush damper. As we sat in the scrub – with the light of a flickering hurricane lantern, a rifle by our side and a warm meal in our mess tins – it wasn't difficult to imagine how the Diggers of 1942 must've felt.



Some of the supplies for the trek.



Ben Camm.



Negotiating a jungle creek.



Taking a much-needed rest.

In the morning everyone had to shave, which was quite difficult given the environment. Rifles had to be cleaned, boots had to be polished, and the bedroll needed to be folded in such a way that it would fit back into the packs. Breakfast consisted of rolled oats, more damper and black tea.

As we fell into our routine of marching in file, manoeuvring over the slippery terrain, struggling to keep warm at night and stomaching the monotonous food, we quickly bonded as a group. This whole trip really was about the journey, not the destination. We now knew what it was like to walk in hobnailed boots, eat iron rations and sleep rough on the ground. We even knew what it felt like to slip head over heels when the soles of our boots became ice skates on the muddy slopes.

In villages we were greeted by locals, and the pride they had in their eyes will forever stand out in our minds. It was the same for our carriers, who took great pride in marching through the villages, particularly Kagi, where many of them came from. It was wonderful to see. There were welcome dances and singing, while the children ran alongside us, laughing. I wondered if this would have been the same for the B Company men all those years ago; the calm before the storm.

One thing we did that was different from the original march was to stop at significant places that had come out of the Kokoda campaign. We fired a blank volley at Brigade Hill and rested on arms reversed at the Isurava Memorial.

We also ran into fellow Australians, who were trekking from the opposite direction. Our hardships were rewarded when we saw the look on their faces. Imagine trekking the Kokoda Track and coming across a group of khaki and mud-clad soldiers. Each of us presented ourselves to these trekkers in the role of the soldier whom we represented.



A moment of quiet reflection.



Trekking through the jungle.



Walking wounded.

"G'day, Private Cec Driscoll from Mildura," said Karl Turvey, playing his part well.

After the initial shock, the trekkers sat and listened to our stories in amazement. The first question they would ask was: "How are your feet holding up?". And the reply was always the same: "The leather boots are good for our sole, both the left and the right one!"

On the last day, as we reached Deniki, a battle honour of the 39th Battalion, we could see the destination of Kokoda Station. The end was in sight but the relief of finishing was marred by a feeling of sadness. We had the ability to leave the past behind to return to the present, but many of the men we represented never returned. They will be forever clad in khaki and mud, destined to remain with their mates on that jungle track. Lest we forget.



Participants on parade.

PHOTOS: COURTESY SOPHIE DE WIT

David Howell is a Melbourne-based historian, author and tour guide. Having grown up with his grandfather's stories of the war in New Guinea, David has made over 40 crossings of the famous Kokoda Track along with visiting most of the major battlefields in present-day PNG.