

Nova Peris OAM

Extracts of Dairy and memories Sept/Oct 2022

The Kokoda Trail

These pictures and story are from 27th September to 3rd October 2022. – Of note, Nova also finished her second trek in October 2023.

Text and photographs were provided to Chris Hoath from Nova Peris in late October 2023 following conversations over Messenger. Chris reached out to Nova after watching her on “The Project” where she revealed she had walked the Kokoda Trail in honour of her Great Grandfather Sergeant Jack Knox WX10552 who served with the 2/16th Australian Infantry Battalion. Nova kindly responded to messages and gave permission to publish her memories and photographs.

Brigade Hill





Day 2 Deniki to Alola - 15km

Up at 4.30am, Weetbix with powdered milk, cuppa tea and we were off after some poetry whilst looking down on the clouds in the valley. I kept thinking throughout the night about what would become over the next 8 days, I just had to trust each step of the way. Take it all in as best I could. I kept thinking how lucky we were and no matter how hard we do it, it could be much worse. Every moment was spent thinking about the diggers, their bravery and sacrifices. They had minimal food, wrong-coloured uniforms, suffering from malaria, and constantly having to be on high alert! It was at times beyond mind boggling and disbelief to think about it all as you walk through the dense jungle.

We headed into Isurava Battle site that seemed to appear from nowhere, the 4 pillars that depict the characteristics of those soldiers so well, SACRIFICE, COURAGE, MATESHIP and ENDURANCE. This battle site is so important because if the Japanese weren't stopped by the 420 young diggers at that point, then perhaps we may have been speaking Japanese now. To think these young men's average age was 21 years, they were totally outnumbered but still hung on for dear life, always believing in their mates, never giving up. To hear such an in-depth history was incredibly moving as we hoisted the flags, read poetry and had a minute's silence to reflect upon those extraordinary diggers, the losses, their spirit, all so heartbreaking.

Sgt Jack Knox WX10552 - 2/16th Australian Infantry Battalion

(John Marcus Charles Knox – MID (Oak Leaf Medal), 1939/45 Star, Pacific Star, Defence Medal, War medal and Australian Service Medal. The battle of Isurava has a personal element to it for me as my Great Grandfather, the late Jack Knox fought on the right flank on the Abuari track as part of the AIF reinforcement of the 2/16th Battalion. Jack was a Scottish / Irish man born in 1905, his first child was my Nana, Nora Peris. She was named Nora by Jack after his Irish mother Honora O'Shea; it was an Irish naming tradition to name the first-born child after the parents. To finally understand what he must have been through, the bravery, just like every single digger that served. My Great-Grandfather's story is found in "A Thousand Men at War" A History of the 2/16th Australian Infantry Battalion. Jack's, (and every other digger who gave themselves) their lives had forever changed during their time defending Port Moresby on the Kokoda Track, for the freedoms we now have.

I took with me my Great-Grandfathers 1939 Bible which he took with him on both the Syria-Lebanon & Kokoda Campaign. It was small pocket size bible and I kept it secured and wore it around my neck when I trekked, and on my chest when I slept at night. It never left my side. It absolutely gave me the extra strength when I needed it and when I walked, I talked to Jack as he was right by my side. It is so hard to describe the spiritual aspect of Kokoda until you walk along that track. Knowing what took place, seeing and experiencing the track and the environmental conditions is what made my mind implode and my heart ache. I still sit even now in total awe of the strength and endurance of the beautiful “fuzzy wuzzy” angels, to also imagine them carrying out our wounded soldiers, away from further injury and attacks. Our most loyal and endearing allies.

When I trekked, we had a small group and we walked at our own pace, never together at all. The whole trek I walked with my own “Legend” called Jonathan and one or two others who at times hung with us, either Waggi, Jacko or Allan. I totally refused to call them porters. Jonathan and the rest of the local PNG were our “legends”, and they were always close by, throwing out a helping hand, grasping the back of my backpack ensuring I did not fall and carried our gear. This is invaluable employment for them. I certainly loved them as much as they loved the trekkers in our group. We all formed a tight bond. I loved their guidance along the way, teaching me about their cultural world, it really is a part of this journey and adds so much more to learning about our heroic diggers plight. I was saddened to see others who weren’t in our group wearing name tags, and their trekkers not having to wear one themselves. Certainly, showed an imbalance of respect.

After we left Isurava we trekked on, and we arrived at Con’s Rock (also known as Surgeon’s Rock) it was named after Lance Corporal Constantine VAFIOPULOUS (Con VAPP) and this is the location where an amputation was done by him (another one of the many incredible sad and heroic stories of the Kokoda Track).

At Con’s Rock, Aidan told us his heartbreaking story and then sang to us “Danny Boy” for his mate and hero the late Stan Bissett of the 2/14th AIF, and there was not a dry eye in the group. At this rock it was where Stan’s brother Butch tragically passed away.

We eventually arrived at Alola. This was where Jack Knox was a senior member of a group of 10 diggers who were cut off by the Japanese and they left the Kokoda Track and went via the virgin jungle back to their own Battalion. Aidan knew this story well and he said that it was because of Jack’s experienced bushmanship, all the diggers made it safely and quickly, although it took 10 days, he had effectively saved their lives. This story was also ‘Mentioned in Dispatches’ and an Oak Leaf Medal awarded to him. My Great Grandfather returned twice back to Kokoda, knowing what he and other diggers endured and witnessed the first time, it is incomprehensible to think that he and hundreds of other Diggers returned, I am told he always just said “I was just doing my job”. His story and his service are a massive part of the family’s history, and I would never have discovered it if I had not taken this pilgrimage on.





When Nova did the Kokoda Trek pilgrimage in 2022, they camped at Templeton's Crossing. Her tent was less than 10 metres away from 15 soldiers that have been recently unearthed over the past few days.

She knew something was going on when she camped that night. Here is the story of that night, whilst she tried to sleep not knowing how close she was.....oh so close - So important to realise the impact of this discovery. "We will remember them. Lest we forget"

Day 3 – Alola to Templetons Crossing, 14km

This was a hard day of downhill that made my knees cry. Going into Kokoda, it is pretty much mandatory by Aidan's company Our Spirit that you have a reasonably high level of fitness. Not only because it is extremely hard trekking, but because most times it's very long hours, up to 10.5 hrs of physical endurance required to get to the next camp site. I felt I had done the training and was cardio fit, but my knees were the result of decades of pounding the sporting fields and pavements, very little cartilage in my right knee, just bone on bone coupled with early arthritis. I had been warned about the impact the downhill would have, but it did not even make me blink an eyelid, I was so determined to do Kokoda and knew I would just persevere and just put one foot in front of the other to reach each destination.

Daily my knees were wrapped tight in knee braces and that was all I needed. Each step I took, the knee pinched but in the whole scheme of what I was there for; it was just nothing more than temporary pain. On this day I had reflected about how we throw the word "LEGEND" around for the 'sporting stars', and to be honest, sporting stars should just be referred to as champions, not legends. Our true legends are our service men and women, our Diggers. Our Diggers are the ones who make the ultimate sacrifices; they give away their own freedoms so that we can have ours. Us sporting people play sport for our own dreams, our own desires, we are pretty much selfish individuals chasing our own goals and when we achieve them it is always about our own individual egos. We are NOT the legends; the legends are those who serve in our forces. Our legends are those who leave their families knowing they possibly would never return, whose individual bravery took them into unknown dangers, and it is they who absolutely fought with the utmost tenacity of men who wanted to live.

My life thus far has always been on one speed, and that was to go fast. On this pilgrimage I soon learnt that it was OK to go slow. To embrace the jungles terrain in its entirety and to feel the history. The history that belonged to everyone who served. I was there to pay respect to those men.

Reaching EORA creek and once again being immersed in the history, you just cannot help thinking how much our Aussie kids would benefit from this historical knowledge, to make them understand why they have the freedoms today (I was never taught about this history at school) I also tried to comprehend how the Japanese managed to get a MOUNTAIN GUN up to the high ridges! Incredible! It also meant our young lads of the 39th Battalion became its 'PREY' once again. After being told about the foxholes (and still so many of them that were very evident and so obvious even after 80 yrs has gone by) that those lads had dug and used as their strategic positioning, I saw them all as we continued to climb up and over the range, eventually arriving at Templeton's Crossing, named after Captain Sam Templeton.

Every step I took the pinching pain in my knee continued, but that inner voice just said "shut the fricken hell up Nova. Shut up". Having this experience made me think over and over again how hard it was for our Diggers. For our wounded, and those that were told to make their way back across the tracks, often crawling on their hands and knees. The endearing love, coupled with the greatest respect and gratitude I have for our diggers grew daily. Lest We Forget, has now been etched in my mind forever.

Once I had arrived at Templeton's Crossing it was just on 5.30pm and almost dark. It was a very long day, 10.5hrs trekking with just another of the most challenging ranges were crossed. It had started to rain in the last hour of the trek, and I got saturated, it was freezing, and irrespective of how we felt, no one complained out aloud. Be fair to say there was a lot of soul searching that took place.

Throughout the trek I carried with me a filtered water bottle and just drank straight from the pristine rivers (never got sick). Our daily lunch was almost always 2 minute noodles but on this day, we had what was like a risotto cooked by our PNG legend Jacko who was the cook on our trip. We were also given daily ration/snack pack each morning after our breakfast of either Weetbix or porridge, that snack / ration pack consisted of a small packet of salted dry biscuits, a muesli bar and some nuts, that kept me going throughout the day.

At Templeton's Crossing apart from the mist being so thick and it being freezing cold, I found it to be so eerie, quite spiritual and that night I believe those spirits around that area paid me many visits throughout the night. Once we arrived at the site, we would setup camp, have a wash if we could, have our dinner, a cuppa tea or milo, talk about the day and then hit the sack. We were always in our tents before 7pm every night.

That night, it felt like someone was watching me, I opened my eyes, and I could see a bright light and it was like a small fire stick was being held and was circling my tent, I was petrified, my heart was racing. I grabbed Jack's bible and put it on my chest and closed my eyes hoping it was just a dream. Nope, I opened my eyes and there it was, I punched the tent thinking I could scare it; it didn't go away. I yelled out to Aidan, no answer from him, then screamed out to Jonno. He shouted, "what's wrong", I yelled out and said that something was at my tent, I could hear him unzip his tent and shine the torch towards mine which was only a few metres away and he said, nope nothing there, "Just hold your bible and don't open your eyes" was the sound advice he gave me. It was Jonno's 2nd time trekking with Aidan, so he knew this place and he knew about the visitors we had throughout the night.

The next morning, I awoke, and my eyes felt like they were hanging on the ground. At breakfast I asked Aidan if he heard me scream out to him, he said 'yes'. To my disbelief I asked him why he didn't respond, he just smiled and said, "well there was nothing I could do or say to make them go away", (referring to the spirits around that site) Jonno said "don't worry mate, the bastards never left me alone either". No wonder there were spirits present because in the morning I learnt that we were sleeping in the site of an old war grave! Hmmm I wonder I couldn't sleep, and thanks to Jack's bible it certainly helped with a bit of comfort throughout the eerie night!

Post the below link in your browser for the ABC report.

https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-25/partial-remains-of-australian-soldiers-unearthed-on-kokoda-trail/102644134?utm_campaign=abc_news_web&utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web

Day 5 – NADURI TO BRIGADE HILL – 12km

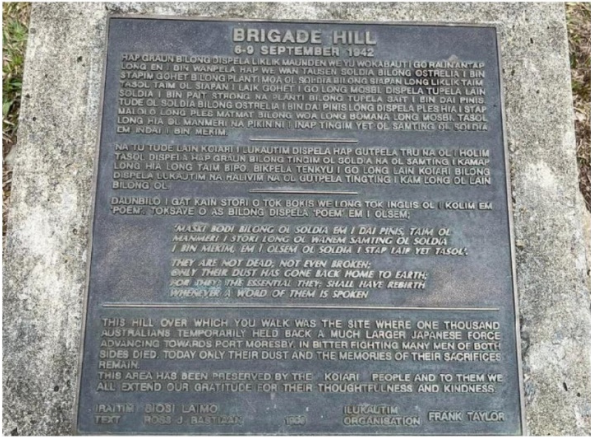
Again, the day started with more downhill, testing the old-girl arthritic knees! We climbed up through a waterfall that ran down the track, its soothing sound telling me to stick to the plan and to stop off and admire not only the harsh density of this incredible terrain, but to take in the beauty of this majestic country that was once full of evil enemies. Stopping not only allowed me to take in the scenery, but it gave me the opportunity to talk to my legends Waggi and Johnathan who never left my side and encouraged me step by step along the way. Eventually we reached Launamu Village where we were greeted with smiles by the locals' selling bags that they made, canned soft drinks cooled by the cold river water, some bananas and softball sized avocados. The local villagers mostly were always waiting, I guess they could see us coming in the distance, ant sized people walking and had time to prepare for the trekkers, and although I don't drink soft drinks much, I really looked forward to a sugar hit along the way, and by the time I had reached Launamu I had already clocked up 3 hours of hard downhill, so the small can of Fanta went down a treat! We left Launamu Village, crossed the Efogi River, shoes off and took advantage of the freezing cold water to rest and soothe the feet and refill the water bottles and then off again toward Efogi Village. The sun this day scorched down and some of the trek was long and flat with no shade in sight. On the outskirts of Efogi I couldn't believe I saw a beautiful big Eucalyptus tree, picked up some leaves and crushed them, the smell took me back home to Australia. I asked Waggi about it and he said on another area of the track there were hundreds of Aussie Eucalyptus trees. I am told that it is a flight path for our birds that travel over. Who knows but it was an incredible site to see!

After having a quick lunch and sharing my food with some local kids we were off trekking towards Brigade Hill. On one part of the trek and being afraid of heights, it was a 200m drop off cliff face and not much track to go on with the single walking path. Anyways, I was always looking ahead, never taking my eyes off the track and taking one cautious step at a time and I got there.

I was really looking forward to reaching the end of the day as this is where my great-grandfather Sergent Jack Knox (2/16th Battalion) had been in combat. All day I felt like he was with me and his bible always around my neck was the constant reminder of him giving me the strength to keep going. Again, hearing the in-depth history that occurred here was mind-blowing. This battle is often referred to as 'Australia's Thermopylae' such a hard fought one. So hard to put in words how it felt to experience those ridges and to try to comprehend how they tried to hang on while under unimaginable intense fire from a far superior numbered Japanese army.

When we arrived, there were some other groups passing through and it was always interesting to see others experiencing and taking it all in, I guess we are all there in some way to individually pay our utmost respect to those who sacrificed and fought courageously to give us our freedoms.

I was able to get a cold shower in (well under a raised tap) and it had a screen around it for myself and Stacey the only other woman in our group who was with her husband on this trek. The screen at least gave some privacy and boy what an incredible view it had. That night we slept there and were told that in the morning we were going to have our own service to encapsulate the history of Brigade Hill. Lest We Forget.



DAY 6 Brigade Hill to NAORO - 21km

This morning started with our own service; we listened / watched a video (this time from a recording of a diggers lived memory).

With the sun rising over the mountains afar I couldn't help but look at those rays as an exact resemblance of "The Rising Sun Badge".

To have heard about the 2/16th, and this was where my grandfather was forced along with other diggers to go bush. Jack was able to use his cartographer's skill to map his way out of the jungle whilst rescuing many others along the way. He would receive Mentioned in Dispatches for all of this.

It was here on top of Brigade Hill, something that looked so majestic with 360-degree views was once filled with ghastly deaths. We learnt that of the 62 lives lost and many of them heroes our "Sons of Australia".

Many who had survived the battle at Isurava, like Charlie McCallum, fell trying to reclaim the track on the saddle at Brigade Hill; others, like Captains 'Lefty' Langridge and Claude Nye died in futile attempts to break through to Brigade Headquarters against immeasurable odds. We were told that they both knew they couldn't do it. They knew they were going to die. We were told that Langridge handed over his pay book and his dog tags to one of his mates. They were both killed.

We Shall Remember Them!

After the minutes silence Aidan asked me to read out a poem by H Bert Beros called "WX UNKNOWN" - without knowing this poem before, I was not prepared for what followed; I had managed to read out the first four of the seven paragraphs before the tears started to flow and no more words could come out, I had to get young Ky our 14 year old who trekked with us accompanied by his father to finish the rest of the poem, and he courageously did.

I guess it really dawned on me, not only as a mother but also having a son who is almost 19 years of age now back home in Australia, and to think young men of his age were sent to war, never to return. This initially was the essence of the poem for me.

I gave young Ky a big hug after and thanked him.

As we took off on what would become the longest day trekking, almost 11hrs and a whopping 21 km. We descended to Manari before climbing out again and descending into the swamps. After lunch at Agulogo we then climbed up the MAGULI RANGE to the Village of NAORO where the last 2 hours it poured with rain and I ascended what they call the 7 peaks.

That morning I had read the poem at 7.06am, at 8.23am I recorded myself reflecting upon the morning and hearing those stories and the impact it had upon me, then at 9.17am I for some reason stopped to take a picture of a tree, with the sun beaming through. I don't know why I did it, but obviously something made me do it.

And that picture I took, not only were the sun's rays spectacular, but it also depicted "THAT RUGGED LITTLE CROSS", it was "WHERE THE TREES ARE DRAPED IN MOSS". I could not believe it, was it where "THE REMAINS OF A HERO UNDER IT LAY"? I don't know, but I do believe in the spirit world, I do believe the entirety of that track is filled with that world of our Diggers who fought and sacrificed themselves and their families gave us what we have today. They are always reminding us that they "WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN" that true meaning of "LEST WE FORGET"

WX -- UNKNOWN

We knew he came from the western State,
Though to us he remained unknown:
For the WX was marked on his hat --
The rest a mortar had blown.

We buried him there on a mountain spur,
Where the trees are draped in moss:
We thought of the mother, no news for her
Of that irreplaceable loss.

Just a boy he looked, with snowy hair,
As we laid him down in clay;
The padre's voice was low and clear,
No others had words to say.

Yet we knew a mother would watch and wait
For a letter sent by her boy,
How she would dream of the things he did,
How his first words caused her joy.

And as he went off to school or game
He'd wave her fond goodbyes,
Just as he did when the great call came,
And the hot tears hurt her eyes.

Perhaps she will know in some unknown way
Of that rugged little cross,
The remains of her hero under it lay,
Where the trees are draped in moss.

We cursed the heathens who stripped the dead,
No pity on them can be shown;
We marked his cross so it can be read:
"WX Unknown"

Written at Nauru, near Menari, Papua

