

Kokoda Track – A Journey I'll Never Forget by Josie Burton

As part of a joint St Mary's and Hale tour, fellow Trigg members Milla Tan, Maddie Bourne and I were selected to travel in a 28-student tour group to walk the Kokoda track. The Kokoda experience was truly one I'll never forget. From the moment we arrived at Port Moresby where the humidity hit us intensely as we stepped off the plane, to the moment the trek finished 10 days later where more than 3,200 Australian soldiers and army personnel were laid to rest during World War 2.

After staying a night in relative comfort at a hotel in Port Moresby, we checked out and flew to Popondetta – a short 30-minute flight over the heart of the Papua New Guinea jungle before jumping into old trucks set up like old war time open air vehicles for transporting soldiers, for a 70km, three-and-a-half-hour drive through the jungle to Kokoda village. That's where we spent our first night in our own tents, full of anticipation for what was to come.

On day one of the trek, the challenge was a shock to the system – steep inclines, heavy packs, and humidity that made every step a test of willpower. The day was wet with 50mm of rain and extremely muggy when it wasn't raining. We finished the day in Isurava after 21km of walking, completely exhausted but proud to have made it. Sleep came easily that night.

By day two, my strength had started to build. The walk to Templeton's Crossing felt easier, being only 12km and I began to appreciate the rhythm of the trek – the sound of the jungle, the laughter of the porters, and the camaraderie building among our group. We continued in the days following through Diggers Camp and then to Brigade Hill, where we held a moving memorial service in honour of the Australian and Papua New Guinean soldiers who fought along the track. It was a moment of reflection and gratitude I'll never forget.

Each day brought new challenges but also new friendships and growing confidence. The PNG porters were incredible – always ready to lend a hand, share a smile, and sing songs that lifted our spirits when fatigue set in. From Brigade Hill we trekked on to Agulogo, then Ioribaiwa, and finally to Goldie River for our last night. By then after 9 days trekking, my feet were aching after more than 100km of undulating, wet and sweaty trekking, but my heart was full.

As I reflected on the journey, I realised how much resilience and a positive attitude had carried me through. I discovered strength I didn't know I had and made memories that will last a lifetime. Despite the cracked feet, lost toenails and skin irritations, trekking the Kokoda Track was, without a doubt, one of the best experiences of my life. I feel incredibly lucky and grateful to have been part of something so meaningful as well as fortunate that I am part of the now generation who reaps the benefits from those who fought for what we have today. It is still jarring seeing the scale of lives lost at Bomana War cemetery, as it is the largest Australian war time cemetery in the world, particularly knowing that soldiers who died were as young as 15.

The experience has helped me understand what others have sacrificed before me and to reflect on how fortunate my generation is to live such a peaceful, idyllic life that we mostly take for granted. We are all so lucky to live in relative tranquillity in the beautiful coastal peninsula we call Trigg Beach. It is a paradise, I now have an even greater appreciation for. Particularly, given those soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice before us to protect the place we call home. There is no greater service than sacrificing yourself to protect others.