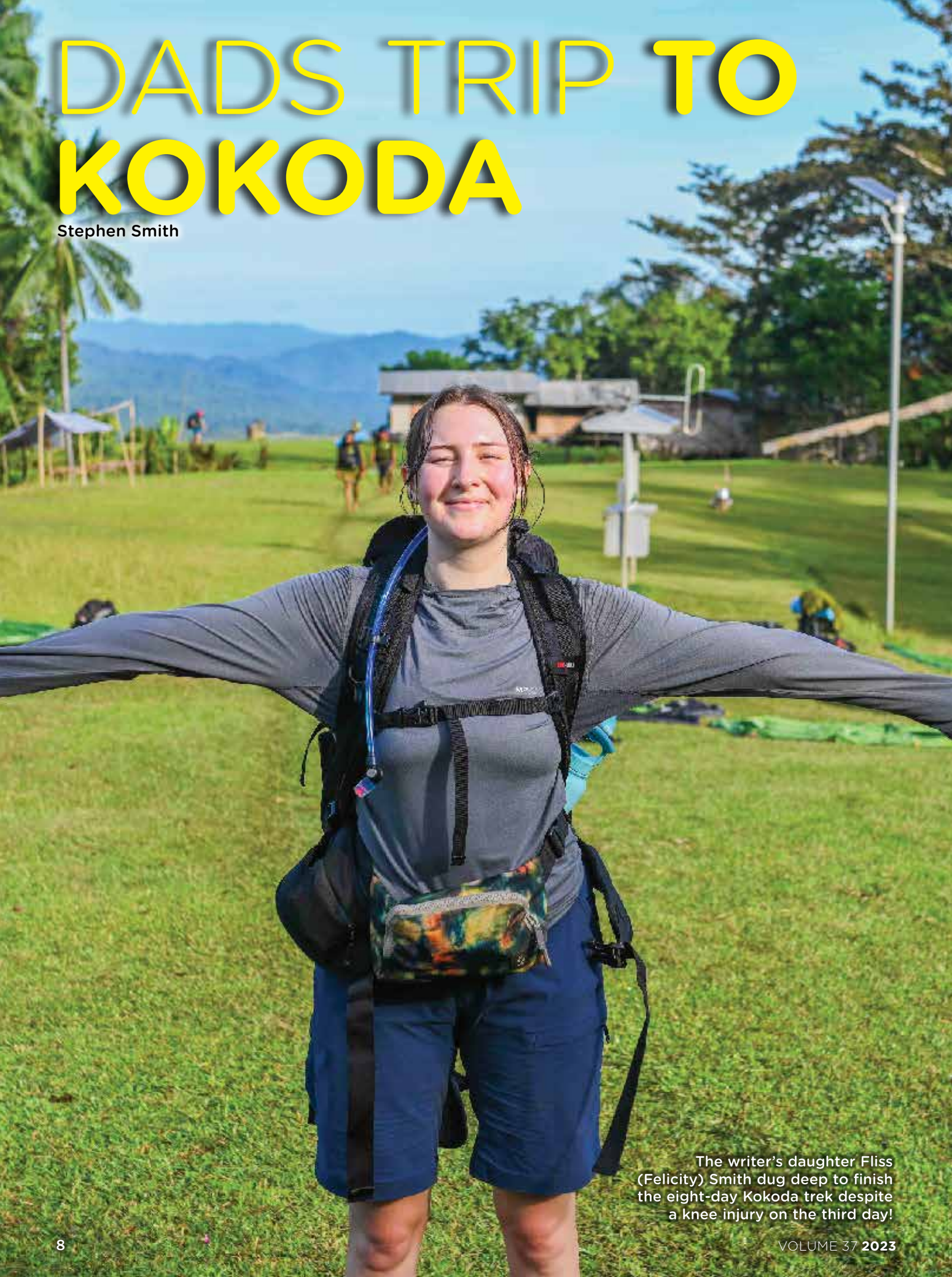


# DADS TRIP TO KOKODA

Stephen Smith



The writer's daughter Fliss (Felicity) Smith dug deep to finish the eight-day Kokoda trek despite a knee injury on the third day!

The trekkers play volleyball at Menari village as well as an impromptu game of rugby after donating a bunch of Melbourne Storm footballs to the locals.



A group of dads in our living room were talking about taking their sons to walk the Kokoda Track, but I've been twice before so thought I'd sit this one out. That was until my son Cooper piped up that he was keen to go, so I called my daughter Felicity in Melbourne (I live about 90 minutes north) and she was also keen.

Felicity's flatmate Ellen also wanted to come, so all of a sudden we had 14 - four of us dads, most of the rest being our respective kids. I originally did the track in 2016 and also went back in 2019 just to help out with the schools so I must have done a good job talking up the experience! The four dads included me with my two, my

brother-in-law Stuart with his two sons, a friend Greg with his son, and another friend Dean, who had walked the track in 2018 with his older son, so this time was taking his younger boy. Our guide Marty

Hook is a builder in Melbourne and walked the Kokoda himself for the first time 16 years ago. He, like so many

Australians, was keen to retrace the steps of the Allied Forces who fought in famous battles in the Owen

**“All of a sudden we had 14 - four of us dads, most of the rest being our respective kids”**

The 14 members of the writer's group - mainly consisting of dads and their kids - pay tribute to the Anzacs at the Isurava battlefield memorial on the Kokoda Track





Fliss is steadied by her carrier as she walks across a log bridge north of Menari village at the base of Brigade Hill

in Melbourne centred around donations from the sale of his late father Jeff Hook's artwork. Jeff was a famous cartoonist with the Herald newspaper group in Melbourne for many decades. Meanwhile, for six months before setting off, our group took training walks around the greater Melbourne area to help ready us for the tough eight-day hike ahead. It was time well spent as the walk is highly physical and emotional. Travelling up and down mountains day after day means digging deep for strength and resilience to complete the trip. My daughter Fliss (Felicity) had it particularly tough as



A mother and her infant welcome the trekkers at Nauro village

she did her knee on Day 3. She could have got the helicopter in to chopper her out but she just said, "Nah Dad, I'm going to finish this." We had 36 local PNG

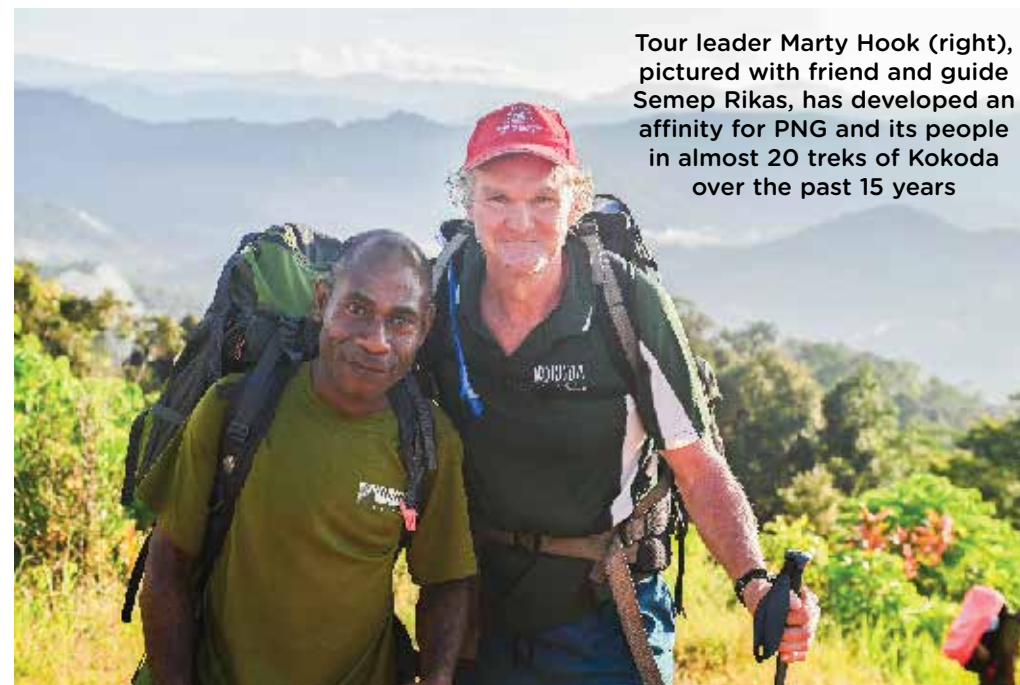
carriers for our group and a couple of them were awesome with her, and along with her brother Cooper and me, we acted a bit like a peloton

Stanley Range back in 1942 as part of World War II. "The legend of the Kokoda Track is a part of Australian folklore,"

Marty says. "There are many, many people in Australia who would like to walk the trail because it is such a fantastic mix of history,

culture, and physical and mental effort." Marty's first walking of the 96km track in 2007 brought an affinity with PNG and its people

and a desire to come back on a regular basis so he formed a tour company, Kokoda Tribute, and in 2009 led his first group. Since then he has been back close to 20 times, and fundraises in Australia to help towns in the mountainous Sogeri area east of Port Moresby - where many of the Kokoda guides come from - with everything from school upgrades and donations of class supplies to giving school kids outings and experiences they may otherwise not get. Before our trip in June this year - the first since the COVID pandemic stopped visits for three years - Marty held fundraisers



Tour leader Marty Hook (right), pictured with friend and guide Semep Rikas, has developed an affinity for PNG and its people in almost 20 treks of Kokoda over the past 15 years

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Felicity Smith jokes around with her brother Cooper, whose support, along with that of her dad Stephen and her “beautiful” PNG carriers, allowed her to finish the trek despite having an injured knee



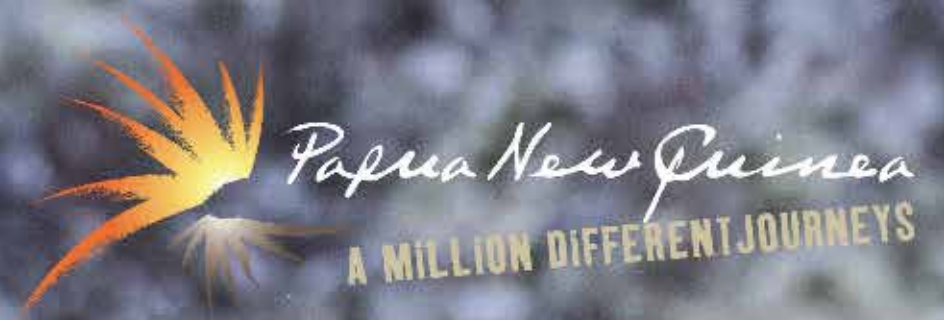
“My dad and my brother walked next to me and were so lovingly patient that it freaked me out - there is nothing scarier when you’re hurt than unrelenting and genuine concern from a younger brother you’re used to joking around with.”

One of the dads, Stuart McKenzie, makes his way up a steep hill on the Kokoda Track



(staying close to take the weight) to help her achieve this challenge. Obviously she was a lot slower with the sore knee so she would head off from camp an hour earlier to get a headstart before the rest caught up. Here’s what Felicity had to say about the experience. “Theoretically, I knew I could rely on my family, but I truly put it to the test! Kokoda was tough - I started the hike while recovering from an infection (I do not recommend it), and it took until the morning of Day 3 for my body to start feeling normal again. On the afternoon of Day 3, I slipped and awkwardly caught

myself, resulting in a fiery bout of knee pain. My genius solution? Stay quiet and limp, which resulted in two very stressed-out knees by about the middle of Day 4 (our trek’s halfway point). “Although stubbornness had gotten me into trouble before, it had never landed me in ‘middle of the jungle with two bung knees’ trouble. I was stressed and in pain - every downhill step felt like someone was sliding a burning hot knife under my kneecaps; walking uphill felt like bliss in comparison. I genuinely believe I would have had to be stretchered out if it weren’t for my dad and my brother. Immediately, without even a flicker of hesitation or annoyance, they stepped up and took weight from my pack and added it to their own. The night they concocted this plan I had to walk (hobble) away because I was tearing up. They both walked next to me and were so lovingly patient that it freaked me out - there is nothing scarier when you’re hurt than unrelenting and genuine concern from a younger brother you’re used to joking around with. Thanks to my beautiful carrier, Semep Rikas, my family, and support from the whole group, I could cross the finish line in style (and by that, I mean drenched in sweat with extensively taped knees!)”



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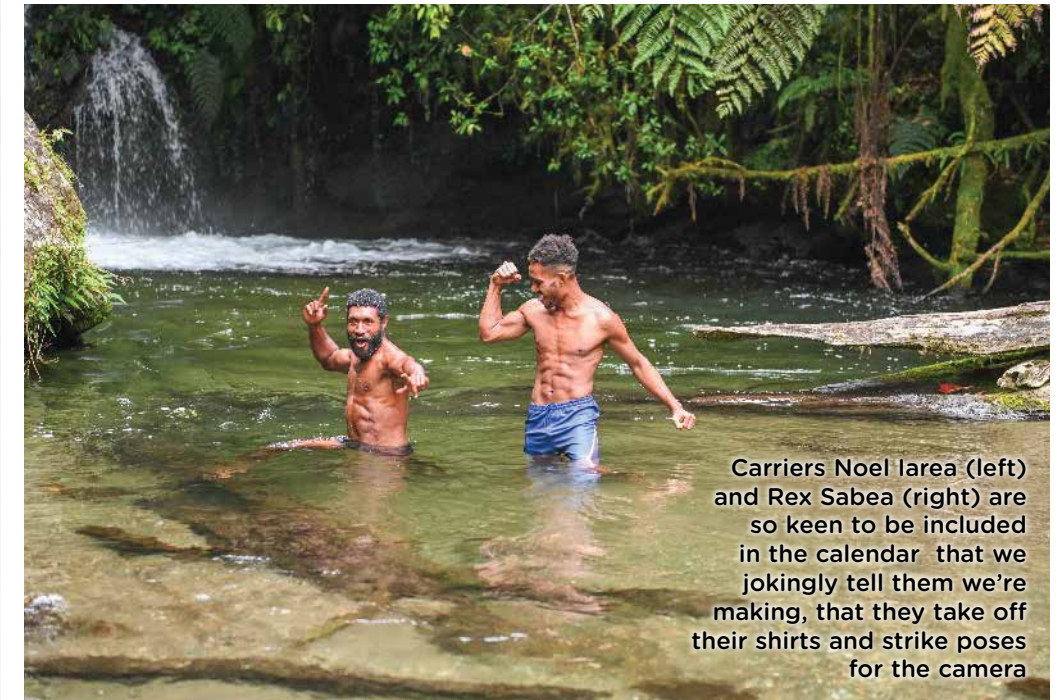
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Trekking through the dry lake bed of Myola 2 on Day 5 of the trek



Carriers Noel Iarea (left) and Rex Sabea (right) are so keen to be included in the calendar that we jokingly tell them we're making, that they take off their shirts and strike poses for the camera

how we were going to make a calendar of the best physiques, so trekkers would pose for their 'month'. A couple of our guides asked if they could be in it

too so we did a photo shoot of them standing in a creek, their shirts off, posing and looking ripped! Fair to say they fitted the bill a lot better than most of us.

Another fun activity with our carriers was instigated by my son Cooper. He'd brought along a pack of cards to introduced them to the game of spoons,



A child in Menari village tries out one of the new Melbourne Storm balls

There were many highlights of the trip, but interaction with the villagers along the way is right up there. A friend of mine is a rugby referee in Melbourne so he'd sent me some gear to donate, including State of Origin gear. Well, you know how mad Papua New Guineans are for rugby, it was like being Santa Claus. In the large village of Menari we arrived early and took down a few Melbourne Storm team footballs to give to the locals. Tossing the balls around graduated to a fully-fledged game of touch rugby league where a couple of the kids were named captains and had to pick from

the group. They chose their friends first and then homed in on the perceived skills of the bedraggled group of trekkers. It was great fun, but the locals really had it all over us with speed and ability. Near Menari we met up with Elijah doing some chainsaw work, who checked our permits and wished us a great day. Later in the trek we were going around the corner after Brigade Hill and there Elijah was again - helping install chains on the cliff face! None of us could believe how quickly he moved from one job to the next, totally eclipsing our efforts. We had a running joke during the trek about

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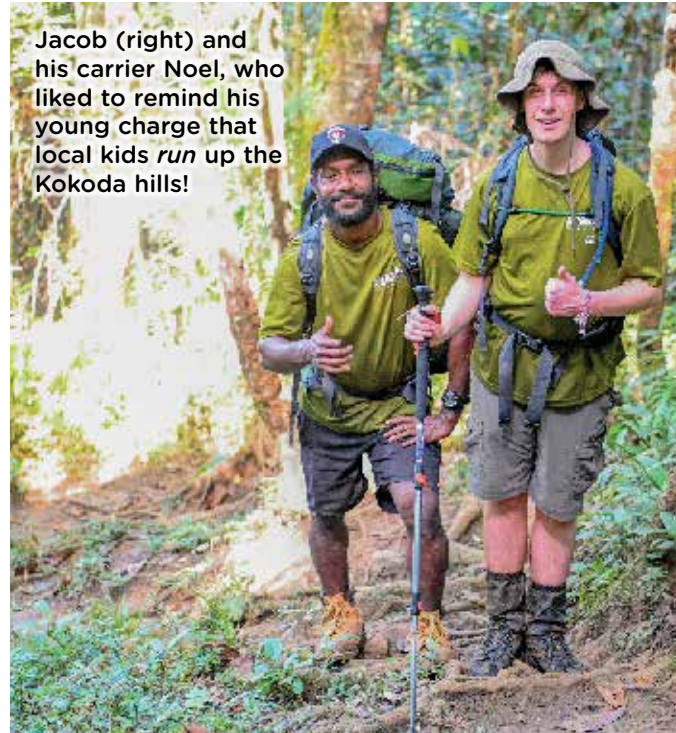
A light moment between dad Dean (right) and son Finlay at the start of the trek

substituting sticks for spoons. The game has players looking for four of a kind with the

first person to achieve this then grabbing a stick. Other players follow suit when they



caption



Jacob (right) and his carrier Noel, who liked to remind his young charge that local kids run up the Kokoda hills!

realise and the last one misses out. The nights were filled with yells of encouragement and

howls of laughter. While all of us had tried to train before the trek, young Jacob, the son of my brother-in-law Stuart, had probably not done quite as much prep as he should and got quite the shock on Day 1 and 2. Tour leader Marty grabbed Jacob's pack to examine the contents and found it weighed down with about 5kg worth of extra snacks and other non-essentials that his overprepared father had thrown



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LEFT: These photos of the two Lockhart sons, Hamish (top) and Finlay (bottom) were taken by their dad Dean at the same spot at Myola on the Kokoda Track five years apart. Hamish's shot was when he walked the track with his dad in 2018, and Finlay's was in June 2023. Finlay was determined to carry his own pack the whole way just like his older brother had.

Sogeri Elementary, Depot and Rouna Elementary School. In all, about 200 kids made the journey," Marty said. "We were able to go to the National Museum and the Port Moresby Nature Park. It was a wonderful experience. To see the looks of excitement on the kids' faces was just fantastic." Before the pandemic, Marty was taking two groups across the track every year, with the trekkers always adding 10 days to help the

in, not realising what a 'tough love' lesson that would prove to be for his struggling son! Needless to say, Jacob's trip improved with a few kilos less in his pack. His assigned carrier Noel had no sympathy, reminding him that local kids *ran* up and down those hills every day so he should be fine!

the hardest fought 1942 battles where Australians delayed the enemy for four days and suffered heavy losses, were also highlights. A highly emotional service held among the stone pillars at Isurava preceded the walk down the hill and into Kokoda under the archway in a trek

that touched every participant. These will be memories to last a lifetime. Afterwards, 10 of us stayed on to help out in the Sogeri region, including hiring buses and taking the local kids down to Port Moresby for the day. "On different days we included children from

The township of Naduri, home of the late Ovuru Ndiki, the last Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel, was another favourite stop on the trip. Joel from the village entertained us with stories and then invited the children to sing. Their beautiful voices were enchanting and something all of the group really cherished, even getting us hesitant visitors to join in. The historic nature of Brigade Hill, beauty of Eora Creek and the amazing Isurava, the site of one of

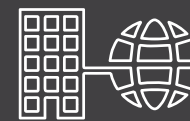


Greg Bennett - the "grandfather" of the group - triumphantly arrives at Kokoda village at the end of the trek, after walking with his son Daylen

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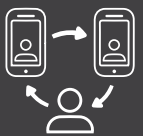
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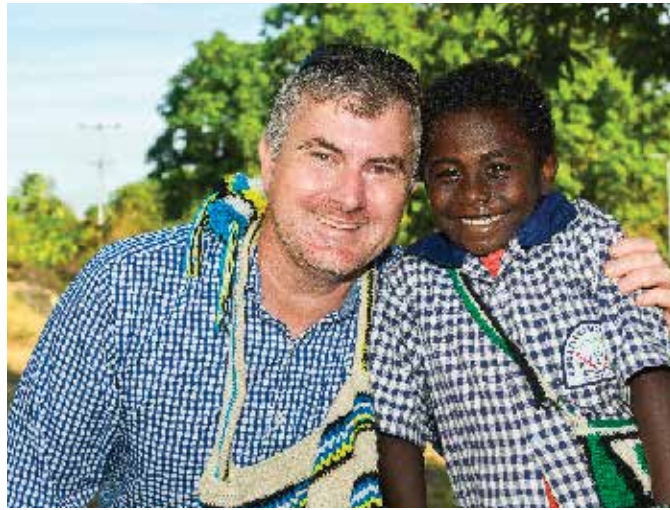
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LEFT: The top photo is from 2019 when the writer Stephen Smith befriended little Sogeri school boy Raymald, while the below photo is from his 2023 visit when he again met up with Raymald, now in primary school, and was able to introduce him to his son Cooper (pictured bottom right).

Describing the 2019 visit, Stephen said, "I'd taken the kids from the Rouna Elementary School to the Port Moresby Nature Park and Raymald grabbed my little finger and didn't let go for about two hours as we walked around the place. The next day as we were heading off to the airport we stopped into the school to say goodbye to the kids and Raymald was outside with his mum. I said hello and told him we were catching the plane that day. He wiped away the tears with the palm of his hand and then took the bilum from his head and put it over mine. I treasure that bilum.

"When I went to the school this year I asked the teachers if he was still around. A few days later when taking the Rouna kids to Port Moresby, one of the teachers came up grinning and said he had a surprise and we picked up Raymald on the way down the hill. He gave me the biggest hug and another bilum, asked about my wife who'd come with me on the last visit - who he referred to as 'the Princess' as no one could say her name Shaneen! It was great to see him again and I was able to introduce him to my kids."



furniture in previous years, along with thousands of kina worth of school supplies. Another time Marty hired a backhoe and removed some dangerous old concrete pillars from the front of the Depot School. "With much help from the kids we turned that area into a garden and sports field," he said. The local community is also very generous,

and gave us bilums and other treasures as a thank you. "The Kokoda is a challenging walk and relies heavily on the assistance of locals to make the trips a success," says Marty. "We will normally employ two local people for every person we bring over. They are our guides, our cooks, our carriers and our friends. There is a great

local community. On his last visit to Sogeri in 2019, Marty and his wife Monique led a group of six Australians who brought in 30

desks and 60 chairs from Port Moresby and assembled them at the local elementary school. Other schools have also received



Fliss Smith leads the children from Rouna Elementary School in a game of 'What's the time Mr Wolf?' during a visit to Port Moresby Nature Park



The Sogeri school kids were also treated to a visit of the National Museum & Art Gallery

will not forget. It's a bond that we have been very keen to strengthen with the work we have done in PNG."

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affinity between the Australian and Papua New Guinea people

which dates back to the camaraderie and help during the dark

times of World War II, and it is something that Australia, as a nation,

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