

LIKE A SOLDIER

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Photo: © The Kokoda Track Trust

For most of us the Kokoda Track is symbolic of courage, honour, mateship, resilience and something that "would be a good thing to do". However when we are confronted with the fact that doing "the track" involves walking 96km over 9 days on a muddy trek, in a country that is extremely rough, with no infrastructure and a debilitating climate, a beach holiday seems like a better option.

Not for Ronnie Travassaras - a woman that on a morning walk 7 years ago with her 14 year old daughter was struck on the left side of her skull by a stack of timber protruding to the side of a speeding Ute and whose family was told after 9 hours of surgery that she was not expected to survive, let alone walk or talk.

Due to her accident, Ronnie has difficulty with reading, memory and emotional connectivity which is why DASSI's Attendant Support Workers are used to assist her with note taking, reminders, activities, interpersonal skills and her Patchwork, Embroidery and Quilting home based business which she started in February 2008.

After 7 months of planning, wrestling for approval and training 3 to 4 days per week, between 4 to 6 hours a day in the Dandenong Ranges with her Attendant Support Worker Sue Elliott, Ronnie walked the Kokoda Track in September 2008.

The story of the Kokoda Track began on 21 July 1942 when the Japanese troops landed on the northern coast of Papua New Guinea with the intent of capturing the nation's capital Port Moresby. Two days later while marching over the Owen Stanley Ranges the Japanese were confronted by Australian troops, who were in significantly smaller numbers, less trained and poorly equipped. They had also trekked from Owens Corner, which was most of the 96km track, to meet their adversaries.

The 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' were the natives who lived in the villages on and around the Kokoda Track. They carried seriously wounded and sick Australian soldiers all the way back to Owens Corner. "Both of the 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' that we met were 101 and 102 years old! They were very well respected along the track and in all the villages", Ronnie said. "We met one of the 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' in a village amongst a group of young children and their parents who sang about 10 church songs to us in both English and their native language. It was so beautiful; we all felt very privileged."

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Dennis, Ronnie's husband and Geoff, Sue's husband, ended up on the telephone organising the necessary paperwork up until 10 minutes before the flight was to depart.

Whilst they were able to fly out of Melbourne further complications arose at Brisbane airport and on the return trip from Port Moresby. "There was a bit of stress and frustration involved, particularly for Dennis who had to spend many hours and days organising the appropriate documentation with the embassy at Port Moresby", Ronnie explains. "We cut it fine again, although this time we had one hour to spare!" laughs Ronnie.

Ronnie was so inspired by and grateful to the native people at Boona that she has decided to support the village financially and through the exchange of goods. Boona is approximately three hours from the Kokoda Track and the location where Winter, Ronnie's personal carrier on the trek, resides. Ronnie also plans on visiting the village next year as part of another trekking adventure.

In the meantime Ronnie plans to continue with her home based business. She also plans on getting back into training with Sue in the Dandenong Ranges and has promised to have her visa sorted prior to going overseas.

"When we arrived in Port Moresby we found out that a cyclone had hit. There where 9 to 10 bridges down and the rain was the heaviest it had ever been", Ronnie said. "This only made the adventure more challenging and real to me"

"The trek was a fantastic experience", Ronnie reflects. "I saw incredible landscapes and vegetation including a Moss forest, learnt tribal law and custom through the natives including the only two living 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' and developed a real admiration for our soldiers."

"I was lucky to have even had this opportunity", Ronnie explains. "When Sue and I were about to depart from Melbourne airport, I was told that I could not leave Australia! A supervisor told us that I did not have a visa to return back to Australia. Even though I am married to an Australian, I am classed as an Australian resident with a British passport. My travel agent didn't tell us that I needed a visa!"



Ronnie with a Fuzzy Wuzzy Angel



Ronnie with Sue