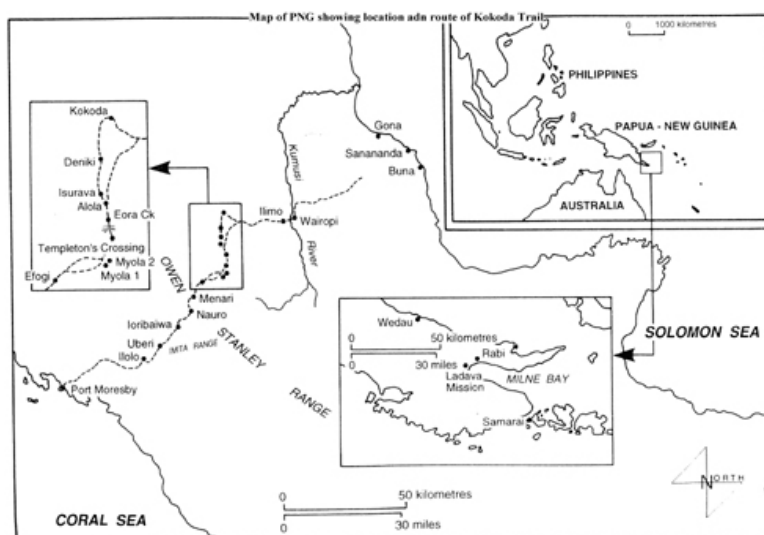


The run down on the Kokoda Recognition Run in honour of Dr Geoffrey Vernon, Military Cross (MC), Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC)

Geoff Honey set out to participate in the 2007 Kokoda Challenge a foot race across the Owen Stanley Ranges in PNG using the Kokoda Track. Geoff dedicated his participation in this event to Dr Geoffrey Vernon MC, Australian Army Medical Corps. Further detailed information on Doc Vernon is contained in the notes attached.

The following notes may give you some idea of the event and the issues faced by the participants.



Source: National Centre for History Education

Getting there

The event starts at either end of the track so you are able to start from Owen's Corner on the southern side and head north to Kokoda or you can start from Kokoda and head south. I took the Kokoda start – finishing at Kokoda required a set timeline for planes back to Moresby. I opted for the increased flexibility of finishing without this added stress!

I arrived at Jackson Field (Port Moresby airport) early Friday afternoon coming directly from Sydney and was met by Gail Thomas, the Challenge organiser and whisked down to the Hevilift (air charter operator) hangar. Hevilift operate across PNG and had two lifts of personnel and equipment for the Challenge flying from Port Moresby to Kokoda on Friday. Somehow the first lift had left plenty of equipment behind and the wages for the staff.

Adding a very PNG solution to this problem, I managed to get landed the responsibility for ensuring all this gear including the wages reached the appropriate personnel at Kokoda. The twin engine Otter was loaded up with about 12 guys, two large wooden signs for the Kokoda Airport, push bikes and other miscellaneous equipment and off we flew straight into cloud.

The cloud stayed with us all the way until we were over Kokoda and then it was a spiral down, down, down until we broke cloud and there was the Kokoda strip. Phew!

Landed, handed over the gear, met up with Rod Ori, an old mate from Kovelio Village, just outside Kokoda and all the other boys from the support crew.

After a reasonable amount of pointing, shouting and rearranging of gear from one truck to the other truck and back again, we loaded up and made for our overnight accommodation – one of the guesthouses that have sprung up at Kokoda in recent years where I met up with the other expat starters – Anna Dunne from Bowral, Daniel Cowley (a Kiwi) and Grant Jephcott, mates who both work in PNG.

We dined on a very typical trekkers dinner, fried rice, sweet potato, sweet corn, boiled choco leaves, all washed down with a beef & vegetable soup, which is delicious.





The plateau which dominates Kokoda was the site of a pitched battle between the Australians (company minus, around 100 men) who were dug in around the rim of the plateau and the Japanese. The Japanese, who numbered around 2,000 attacked late afternoon with heavy weapons, machine guns, mortars and then assaulted the Australian position.

The Australians held on till the early hours of the next day and then withdrew. The 39th's CO, Lt. Col. Owen a survivor of the Japanese invasion of Rabaul, was mortally wounded at this battle and tendered to by Doc Vernon. The Doc and the Bn 2IC were the last Australians out of Kokoda as they withdrew to Deniki, a small village just up into the hills behind Kokoda.



L to R - Anna, Daniel, Grant

Saturday 26th August 2007

Up around 6.00 am, having listened to the chooks crowing since 3.00 am, a quick breakfast cramming as much carbohydrate as you can in and then into the back of the official transport and down to the start line outside the Kokoda Hospital. The hospital was a gift from Australia in 1992, the 50th anniversary of the campaign and opened by Paul Keating. The facilities are great, similar to a hospital in a small Australian town, only problem – little or no medicines.

Then it was time for race registration which entailed pulling your bib out of a box, having the number recorded, signing an indemnity form, photo op and then over to the start line.



The number of people participating in the run has at this stage swelled to 28 with 24 nationals. The briefing – “be careful, drink plenty of water, the checkpoints are at etc etc etc” and then ready, set ...whistle. The dash for most has begun, as for the rest of us (see the old bloke at the back in the white T) – it's a case of the best time we can manage – see you at the other end.

Down the road to Kovello, in the relative cool of the morning, stopping to say goodaye to Rod's family which has swelled by another arrival since last time and then onto Hoi (340 metres above sea level), the first checkpoint, manned by Rod and crew with sliced paw paw, pineapple and cucumber which was incredibly refreshing.

Hoi marks the start of the slog up to Isurava Village (1220 metres) which was reached at 1100 hours. Sweating at an incredible rate but on balance feeling pretty good. Still in a group of four which Anna dubbed as the Kokoda netball team due to the type of bibs we were wearing at this stage. Very soon after this I stuffed mine into my pack as they were great for heat retention which is the last thing I needed.

Across the contour to Isurava Memorial (1370 metres) – an incredibly evocative memorial. The memorial features four granite plinths with the words 'courage', 'endurance', 'mateship', and 'sacrifice'. The memorial was opened in 2002, the 60th anniversary at a ceremony called the “Last Parade” attended by many of the veterans.



Down the Yodda Valley beyond the memorial is Kokoda Village.



Isurava was the site of an epic battle between the “choco” soldiers of the 39th Battalion, (around 450 strong) up against some 3,000 to 4,000 of the best the Japanese Army could muster. The 39th were on the verge of being overrun when they were reinforced by the 2/14th Battalion, literally just in the nick of time. The battle raged, but the overwhelming force of the Japanese in terms of men and arms forced a fighting withdrawal down to the Track. It must be remembered, that to the Australian soldiers they were fighting to stop the Japanese establishing a base in Port Moresby with which to launch an invasion of Australia. They were fighting to save Australia!

Following the contour across to the village of Alola (1180 metres) passing by the solid rock operating table used by army surgeons. At the village the track drops down to the creek line. This creek crossing was something of a balancing act across a single log. The climb out of the creek and across to Eora Creek (1425 metres) was really slow as I felt quite exhausted going up the small rises that are a feature of this leg. Arrived just as the others were about to leave (1400 hours).

Scoffing a "decent" lunch which featured processed meat which on the tin proclaims Corned Beef, to the locals it's "bully" (the term a hangover from WW2), and to the eye it's pretty ordinary. At this stage, there was general agreement that Roland, a local from Kokoda, should travel with me as a safety precaution and company to Ower's Corner – I certainly didn't protest! So after something resembling a rest, we tackled the hill immediately behind the camp which rises to 1910 metres, a climb of around 500 metres. This piece of track has a special place in Australian military history. It was held by the 39th Bn (militia) as the two AIF Bns, 2/14th and 2/16th withdrew through their positions. This was the first time that the militia had held ground in defense of the AIF.

Eora Creek was the site of a field dressing station during the withdrawal phase of the campaign. To earn a stretcher you had to be wounded to the point that you were not able to crawl! The climb was much easier than the hills walked in the morning. I have to put it down to the "bully"!

Following around the hills through Templeton's 2 then Templeton's 1 and then ascending to Mount Bellamy at 2190 metres the highest point on the track. This is also called the Kokoda Gap and was the point that the High Command in Brisbane, on the basis of a map reconnaissance, instructed the engineers to rig charges to blow if the Japanese continued their advance.



L to R GH, Roland, Chris

No probs.....its only 500 metres wide and planes fly through it! The nuclear bomb was still three years away, but "hey we're in Brisbane (and safe) and we know best". That order was up there with the order given to Lieutenant Ower to build a jeep track across the Owen Stanley's. He got as far as Owers Corner which now bears his name. His survey team did a great job working with the engineers to make the track as accessible as possible for the fighting brigades that were to cross it.

At Templeton's 2, I shared a small hut with the locals. I broke open a packet of dried biscuits and offered one to an old man. He gladly took the packet and that was the last I saw of them – he ate the lot. That was probably dinner!

The mud across the moss forest ridgeline from Mount Bellamy was thick and gluggy at a depth of around 15 to 25 cms. We had to slob through this to the 1900 Crossing arriving at around 2100 hours. Quick meal and then onto Naduri. About half way we came across a group of competitors (all nationals) going the other way with a radio blaring away and in the distance the lights of Port Moresby. A somewhat surreal experience. We stopped for a while took in the view and chatted whilst listening to the PNG top 40.

We reached Naduri a beautiful ridge top village in bright moonshine around mid night. Efogi was just across the next ridgeline, reaching this checkpoint at around 0100 on Sunday 27th August. The boys were still manning the checkpoint waiting for us to walk in. They did a great job in looking out for us.

Sunday 27th August 2007

Met up with the others at Efogi (1140 metres) and we snatched four hours sleep in the guesthouse. I wasn't prepared for any sleeping and due to the elevation it was cool. I must have looked quite tired using a rubber mattress as a blanket! Out of Efogi at 0530 hours after a quick meal of beef curry. All checkpoints had dehydrated "just add hot water" ration packs. Being one of the last the selection was somewhat limited. Pushing up to Brigade Hill and the other members of the Kokoda netball team powered on and that was the last I saw of them until Menari which they were leaving as I arrived.



The outlook from Brigade Hill at 0730 on a Sunday morning is something else – 360 degrees of the Owen Stanleys and a clear vista 600 metres down to Menari village where Lt. Col. Ralph Honner had his first parade of the 39th Battalion. Honner had taken command of the battalion in the field after the death of Lt. Col. Owen at Kokoda.

Brigade Hill (1415 metres) is where the Japanese split the communications between the three fighting battalions and brigade headquarters which eventually lead to a further withdrawal of the Australian forces back to Iorabaiwa. The 2/27th Bn was completely separated from the other battalions and had to bush bash over a period of four weeks to Ower's Corner. During this period they had to scrounge food from abandoned village gardens hidden in the jungle at all times carrying their wounded. A truly epic journey emulated by numerous smaller parties at various times of the campaign.

39th Battalion parade, Menari, 6th Sept 1942
Source: 39th Bn website

Note that many of the men are parading with walking sticks having handed over their weapons to the AIF units who came forward to replace them after seven weeks of continual front line activity.

Onto Nauro via Menari Gap (1200 metres) and another tin of "bully", having survived a dunking in Brown River after falling into a hole whilst crossing the river. Thank heavens for the gravel bank just down stream!



Nauro at just over 1000 metres is about half way up to the top of the Maguli Range which tops at 1350 metres. A family has carved out a hill side about half way up and established yet another guesthouse which also retails a variety of soft drinks!

At the top of the Maguli Range you can look down to a mining camp – probably an insight into the future (unfortunately). Down to Ofi Creek, getting to the creek line in the late afternoon absolutely knackered. Pretty clear that Owers Corner was not a reality tonight as it was at least still 7 hours away.

Made the decision to overnight at Lorabaiwa Village, which we reached at 1900 hours after having slipped down from the summit. Not ashamed to admit more than happy to take Roland's hand at various times to steady the rate of descent! The locals just know when to appear and put out their hand – always take it.

At Lorabaiwa, the boys served up a great meal and I was sleeping rough by 2000 hours. I had an idea the following would happen and it did. Tap on the shoulder, told to roll over while they slipped a foam mattress under me and threw a blanket over the top with a pillow.

Have to look after these crazy white men. Where did they get a foam mattress in the middle of the Owen Stanley's?

Monday 28th August 2007

Out at 0700 hours and finished at Ower's Corner which we reached at 1300 hours. The last leg is 10 kilometres direct on the map and took 6 hours of pretty determined walking, scooting downhill. By this time our party had swelled to 6 as we picked up all the boys manning the checkpoints so I was certainly in good hands.



The other expats, Anna, Grant and Daniel had walked out early that morning. They overnighted at Owers then went into Port Moresby early to link up with the first flight back to Australia at 0640 hours.

A perspective

My total walking time for the Kokoda Challenge was 36 hours over a total of 54 hours. Felt pretty pleased with myself but to put some perspective on my effort – the winner did it in just under 18 hours non stop!

Great event, but at this stage I can tick it off and treat it as a oncer!

Many thanks for the support and an extra special thanks to Roland and all his mates – much appreciated.

To "Doc" Vernon and all your contemporaries – we salute you.

Kokoda Recognition Run in honour of Dr Geoffrey Vernon, Military Cross (MC), Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC)

The battle for the Kokoda Track (June to November 1942) was, for the soldiers on the ground, the battle for Australia.

The resolve of the Australian soldiers was tested against a battle hardened enemy who enjoyed overwhelming superiority in numbers and firepower. This was then coupled with extreme deprivations as a result of a stretched Australian supply line.

Against the odds, the Australians triumphed.

Leaders rose to the fore in this campaign. They were officers, NCOs and privates on the ground such as Private Kingsbury VC. Other personnel to rise to the occasion included:

1. **Herb Kienzel** who organised the carrier lines ensuring the supplies made their way to the soldiers at the front.
2. **Major Chaplain Albert Moore** of the Salvation Army who accompanied the first AIF unit across the Track (2/14th Bn), tendered to the pastoral needs of the troops and established the aid stations much used by the troops traversing the Track.
3. **"Doc" Vernon** who, without official sanction, attached himself to the 39th Bn as their unofficial Medical Officer, was present at the first battle for Kokoda (July 1942) and stayed with the Bn until their medical staff were able to come forward. Doc then assumed responsibility for the medical needs of the "fuzzy angels".

Doc lowered his age to enlist and was 60 years old in July 1942. To the Army he was 52.

Kokoda Challenge

In 2005 a foot race was held over the Track and this has now become an annual event. The event attracts mainly locals but there is an increasing number of Australians participating.

The run starts on Saturday 26th August 2007 at Ower's Corner (near Port Moresby on southern side of the Owen Stanley Ranges) and finishes at Kokoda (northern side of the Owen Stanley Ranges), sometime over that weekend.

The Track is around 96 kilometers in length – no-one is exactly sure of the distance due to the topography and the ever changing physical location of the track.

There are no aid stations, apart from the villages along the track, and minimal medical support.

Geoff Honey has entered the Challenge and will dedicate his run in recognition of the accomplishments of Doc Vernon.

Geoff Honey

Geoff is a trek leader with Adventure Kokoda, an Australian based trekking company. Geoff is based in Sydney, married with three children and works within the Australian grains industry. Geoff was a former Army Reservist serving in various infantry units.

Sponsorship

Geoff is seeking sponsorship for this Recognition Run, which honours the memory and accomplishments of Geoffrey Vernon.

Funds from the sponsorship will go to the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps (RAAMC) to support RAAMC personnel both now and in the future.

This fund is held in trust on behalf of all RAAMC members and is audited by the Albury Wodonga Military Area (AWMA) Regimental Audit Board to ensure compliance with Commonwealth non-public monies financial management guidelines.

The RAAMC will issue a receipt and all sponsorships are fully tax deductible.

At this stage we are only seeking a pledge to contribute, with pledges being called in by the RAAMC when the run is completed. Geoff is meeting all his own expenses to undertake the run.

Please sponsor this Kokoda Recognition Run in recognition of "Doc" Vernon MC and help contribute to an ongoing RAAMC award that will be a lasting testimony to the grit and determination of those Australians who helped forge this great country.

A completed pledge prior to 26th August 2007 would be appreciated.

PLEDGE – please fax (02 9339 3556) or email (Shaun.fletcher@defence.gov.au) to Lt. Col. Shaun Fletcher

Name _____

Address _____ **Postcode** _____

Tel _____ **Mobile** _____ **Email** _____

I pledge to contribute \$ _____ upon the successful completion of the Kokoda Challenge by Geoff Honey.

I understand that the RAAMC will contact me (via email if possible) to call on the pledge.

Signed _____ **Date** _____

More information – the run

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Geoffrey Hampden Vernon, MC (1882 – 1946)

From - [Australian Dictionary of Biography Online](#)

Geoffrey Hampden Vernon was born on 16 December 1882 at Hastings, Sussex. Educated at Sydney Church of England Grammar School (Shore), he studied medicine at the University of Sydney (M.B., Ch.M., 1905).

He was appointed Captain in the 4th Light Horse Field Ambulance, Australian Imperial Force, on 4 March 1915, and served in the Middle East as Regimental Medical Officer of the 11th Light Horse.

He was awarded the Military Cross for 'gallantry and devotion to duty' under heavy fire on 8 August 1916 near the Hod el Beheir oasis, Sinai; promoted Major in January 1917, he was wounded in action in November at Tel el Sheria and returned to Australia in August 1918.

During the post war years he became a planter in PNG and in 1942 he lowered his age by eight years and enlisted in the Australian Army Medical Corps at age 60.

He initially established a hospital at Ilola, at the start of the Kokoda Track, however he realised that the first troops moving over the Track (39th Bn) did not have medical support so he gathered what equipment he had and followed in their footsteps.

Geoffrey Vernon was present at the first battle of Kokoda (28 July 1942) and tendered to the fatally wounded Lt. Col. Owen.

He was the second last officer out of Kokoda joining the Battalion 2IC. "Doc" Vernon stayed with the forward elements of the 39th Battalion until their RMO joined the battalion.

"Doc" then became a tireless advocate and carer for the "fuzzy wuzzy" angels and was present at the flag raising ceremony marking the recapture of Kokoda on 3rd November 1942.

From – ["When valour is more than a slouch hat"](#) Alan Ramsey, Sydney Morning Herald, August 17 2002

Vernon was an extraordinary man. Raymond Paull, in "Retreat from Kokoda" wrote: "The legendary figure of the Kokoda Trail was Dr Geoffrey Hamden Vernon. A tall, elderly Australian, Vernon cheerfully took upon himself the care of the native carriers toiling over the trail beneath the loads of supplies and equipment and returning with stretcher casualties.

The Australian people, who generously extolled the praises of the 'Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels' in the months ahead, failed to realise that the carriers' patience, tenderness and fortitude with wounded Australians rewarded, in part, Vernon's unsparing services on their behalf.

"Son of a Sydney architect, Vernon graduated in medicine and surgery to a practice in the distant Queensland town of Winton. He relinquished this to serve in the First AIF as regimental medical officer with the Light Horse, and returned to Australia with the Military Cross and a deafness caused by a bursting shell on Gallipoli in 1915.

The outbreak of World War II found him [as a planter] in Misima [in the Owen Stanleys]. Knowing his age (60) and disability excluded him from active service, he volunteered to substitute anywhere in [Papua] for a younger man. "A walker on a marathon scale, he combined duty with enjoyment for the next two years on medical patrols.

When the Australian Government evacuated [600 white] women, children and older men in December 1941, Vernon refused to go.

Authorities threatened him with arrest. He ignored them, determined to find his own niche. In June 1942, after serving in a native hospital at Sapphire Creek, he transferred to Ilola [in the foothills of the Owen Stanleys] and there became responsible for the carrier lines on the Kokoda Trail."

A Japanese invasion force landed at Gona on the Papuan north coast, without incident, on the afternoon of July 21, 1942. Their advance inland was rapid. Japanese troops reached Kokoda by July 28 after fierce clashes with retreating Australian forces.

The Australians withdrew from Kokoda the next day. Vernon was with them. He had walked from Ilola, arriving at the village of Deniki, overlooking Kokoda, on the morning of July 28.

Peter Brune, an Adelaide school teacher, in his 1991 book *Those Ragged Bloody Heroes*, quotes Warrant Officer John Wilkinson, of the 39th Battalion: "Vernon arrived out of the fog. Very pleased to see him. He had some instruments and dressings in two triangular bandages. He nearly got shot owing to his unregimental dress.

Shorts, which were really strides rolled up; a blue pullover tied around his neck; a felt army hat worn as no hat should ever be worn, and a long newspaper cigarette in his mouth. A small dillybag, and some army biscuits and tobacco in it.

He saw me and spoke, 'Jack, I heard there was some action here and thought you may need some assistance. Where do I start?' What a man!"

Brune writes: "Vernon was responsible for maintaining the health of the native porters. His compassion and skill were also of immeasurable value to the young Australian militiamen of the 39th Battalion.

He was to die in 1946 at the age of 63, with scant recognition from authorities. A native hospital at Maipani in a remote part of Papua serves as his only memorial."

Honours and awards (gazetted) - Geoffrey Hampden Vernon was awarded the following honours:

WWI

Military Cross

Service - Army Rank - Captain Unit - AAMC

Mention in Despatches

Service - Army Rank - Captain Unit - AAMC

WW2

Mention in Despatches

Service - Army Rank - Captain Unit - ANGAU and AAMC