

## **KOKODA ELITE TRAIL**

**Who:** Alex Petrou and Dion Taylor

**What:** An attempt to complete the Kokoda Trail in under 3 days

**When:** April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011 – April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011

**Why:** To raise funds for Far North Queensland brain tumour victims Evie Shaw, Saffron Bryant and Kim Jenkins

### **KOKODA INTRO – The calm before the storm.**

With 24 hours to go before I leave for the Kokoda trail in what I anticipate will be one of the toughest challenges of my life, I have had considerable time to reflect on how I came to be here and what it is I hope to achieve.

My intentions, once I arrived back from "Unite for a Change", were always to pursue social justice and to form a group of like-minded partners who shared a similar vision, though I guess I never anticipated finding them as quick as I did. The first day Adam, Spencer, Lamar and I sat down to discuss Seed of Thought, I knew the dynamics were right, and for the first time in a long time, my personal belief that we could really change people's lives was strong.

So how did taking on the Kokoda trail in such a constrained time frame make it to the table? I guess it was partly due to the fact that while I was in the midst of walking from Brisbane to Cairns, Saffron (Bryant) called me, informing me of the doctor's diagnosis. I promised to assist her in any way I could, and once I found out about Evie and Kim (all three girls have been diagnosed with brain tumours), the trip became a certainty.

Though it provided the motivation I needed, the sole purpose of this challenge/fundraiser --- as I have explained to many --- was not only to raise money for the girls & assist them with the financial burden of life-saving surgery, but to also rally the North Queensland community together to inspire the girls in a difficult time and to inspire others around us that, they too, may take positive action towards changing their own lives. I think Edward Everett Hale said it best when he quoted:

"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do."

So that was it --- 1 large Kokoda Elite Trail please... Does that come in a meal with fries and coke? :) When I first contacted Dion Taylor at Kokoda Spirit, I was met with an energetic personality. Dion had read my proposal (To complete the Kokoda Trail in 3 days, when a usual trek lasts between 7 – 10 days) and was so excited about the project; there was no way, I thought, that we were not going to do this. Part of Dion's enthusiasm was that his daughter only recently

underwent surgery and he could, therefore, automatically relate to the families of Evie, Saffron and Kim. Over the coming weeks leading up to our epic trek, Dion and I conversed a lot and were fuelled by each other's zest.

In spite of the daunting task that lay ahead of us, we still struggled to attract any local media attention. The Cairns Sun wrote about our journey (Thanks, Pasco!), and those of us at Seed of Thought did our best to market the campaign without selling it to people --- I think one always needs to be careful as to how hard they push a certain project. At no stage did we ever want to come across as self-promotional, to the point of egoism. But, as always, how can one raise awareness and achieve maximum efficiency without striving to capture the hearts and minds of the community? Yes, this is an open question, as I still don't have a definitive answer. If Seed of Thought is to change people's lives, perhaps we need to think less about the opinions of those who are all too eager to criticize, and focus on the task at hand, paving the way for others who seek inspiration.

“A man who wants to lead the orchestra must turn his back on the crowd.” - Max Lucado

In closing, it is now Friday morning. Am I nervous? Absolutely! But after speaking with Meredith (Evie's mother) and Kath (Saffron's mother), I am focused and ready to go. Besides, those mountains can't go on forever... can they?

### **KOKODA DAY 1 – Welcome to the house of pain... Please leave your skirt at the door.**

Well, what an ordinary start to the trip. Arriving at the airport on time only to remember I forgot my beanie (I really wanted to wear a beanie) and then my plane was delayed, which put us in a difficult position. You see, the plan was to arrive in PNG at 1:30pm, at which point I would meet with Dion so we could both drive to Owens corner in order to begin the treacherous hike and try to get in a solid 4 hours before dark. Long story short, I arrived in Port Moresby at 5pm, which meant we would not start hiking until at least 7pm.

When I stepped outside the airport, I automatically entered a defensive mind frame. I was the only Caucasian person in the vicinity and it felt like there were a thousand eyes on me --- well, it didn't just feel like it; I could see them. This feeling of being alienated from a crowd gave me my first “real” insight of what it might be like for a coloured person, not only in today's society, but also (and in particular) throughout the 60's and 70's. Although I try to keep a very neutral viewpoint of people, I think now more than ever before I can understand the urgency to view all human beings through a colour blind and culturally neutral lens. As Martin Luther King Jr. stated in his “I Have A Dream” speech, we are “not to judge a man by the colour of his skin, but by the content of his character”.

I think it is easy for one to get sidetracked on occasion and stereotype or prejudice, something I will be consciously aware of in the future.

We arrived at Owens corner just on 7pm after crossing a few flooded rivers. I met our porters on the way up and they seemed polite and kind. The plan now was to get moving as soon as we got

there, hike through the night and try to make up for lost time. Once we arrived at our location, it was out of the truck, a quick hello to a few of the guys and then time to get marching. Dion gave me a quick briefing and through the pouring rain we began our descent. Well... it must have been about 45 seconds before we all started slipping and sliding. We began to count (apparently that is tradition) but we soon realized that the rain had basically created a mud-slide all the way down the mountain. I have to be honest, I had no idea what to expect and after about 10 minutes I thought, "far out, this is going to be one hell of a battle". Dion advised me to try not to cut myself as the trip would surely be over if this was to occur and what happens? 5 minutes later good old Alex slips and slices his finger open --- hide that AI and tell Dion about it tomorrow.

About an hour into the journey, we had our first creek crossing. Now, take into consideration that these creeks are only supposed to be knee deep at best. Well, not this time --- I mean, ha-ha, that would make it too easy, right? So off came the shoes, above the head went the bag and inside the stomach went the testicles as the water slowly crept up to just under chest height --- FANTASTIC! When we got to the other side, it was still raining so we decided against changing into dry clothes --- a decision that would torment me for the entire trip. As we hiked through the night (crossing another 15-20 creeks), I drifted in and out of deep thought about what exactly I don't remember, though I guess it was a mixture of what got us there, the girls and all they were going through, and most of all, how far we had left to go.

At around 3am, we arrived at a village camp located at the top of a small mountain. We were exhausted --- the uphill battle in the pouring rain was tough, equally none of the porters, or Dion himself, had ever trekked the Kokoda at night-time & there were two occasions where we almost got lost and had to reassess where we were. The small village hut we were to sleep in, to put it nicely, was uncomfortable, cold and, well... not modern at all. The winds blew with a humbling conviction and there were no walls, holes in the floor and cockroaches crawling everywhere! Despite all these minor issues, Dion and I finally changed into some dry clothes and tried to warm up. Dion gave us no-more than two hours to get some sleep, but neither of us did as, despite our warm clothes, we were both still freezing & I had already been lucky enough to be left with some pretty serious chafe on the insides of my legs from hiking in wet compression gear - Yippeee!

## **KOKODA DAY 2 – Remember when you thought you were a man?**

Well, Day 2 kicked off about an hour after Day 1 had ended. It appeared Dion had finally managed to fall asleep on the other side of the so-called hut and I couldn't help looking over at him with his sleeping bag (which I did not bring) and thinking he looked so warm, although I would later find out he had been freezing as well. The porters were meant to cook us some breakfast --- their only job, but they forgot, so Dion whipped up some pasta from one of our sponsors. It was organic pasta which tasted amazing and we mixed it with some South American trout (from the same sponsor) and believe it or not, dried fruit. Now, I would never eat this mixture by choice but to be fair, it tasted amazing and gave us all the nutrients, protein and carbs we needed. Plus, I couldn't believe how good the trout was --- Dion and I were freaking out! I wanted to purchase it by the kilo when I returned to Oz and I made him aware of this! We laughed a bit and then boo-ya! Time to get back to the hike...

The start of the hike required a straight vertical and we just didn't want a bar of it. At 5am and with no sleep, the 6 of us were all looking exhausted and grumpy, my chafe was already starting to rub and slipping had become the new Black. We powered on until 11am at which point we arrived at yet another small creek. Dion decided we could rest for 30 minutes and jumped in the water. I was already freezing and wanted to keep my chafe as dry as possible, so Dion just sat in the water by himself \*bless, and I sat down and had a little whinge to myself about how much I hated walking up hills.

30 minutes on Dion's watch is about half the time of a normal person's watch and as we gathered our gear, it was straight back in to marching uphill. For the next 4 hours, we barely spoke except for the odd break in which we bitched about the track, the constant pain in our legs and the rain. The power bars we were eating began to feel a little funny in the stomach and when peering out & into the horizon, all I could see were more mountains to climb --- "can't wait" I thought, "mountains are the best!" By about 1pm, we ran into the only flat ground we were to experience until the final 3kms. of the Kokoda trail. The only problem with this was that it was like a swamp, with our legs sinking up to our ankles in filthy, sloppy mud and, after 2 hours of pushing through, I almost caught myself asking for another mountain! Yes, I am serious; it was hard to move, and when your shoes fill up with dirt, stones and muddy water, you start getting just that little-bit-more agitated. The boys advised me we had a small river crossing and then we would be breaking at a small village --- sweet as bro! (in my kiwi accent) I said, until we reached the river. By now, you could probably guess --- it was flooded and roaring! The crossing we were supposed to use to get over the other side was gone and it was at this point Dion looked at me, saying solemnly "that is it, mate --- all over". I got a little excited --- as you do when you are tired, but then something happened --- we both became angry. So we did what angry people do and became irrational and decided to cross the creek as it was. It was high (about chest level) and by the time we got to the other side, we were about 30 metres downstream, so the boys had to cut a new path to get back to the old one. It was shortly after that we arrived at what I would affectionately come to know as "rest village", where Dion and I again tried to get warm. As I undressed, I looked at my chafe in disbelief, for it had blistered up and was not looking sharp at all. By now, however, I was too tired to care so I just lay down & tried to get some rest.

After 30 minutes, I was over it and so was Dion. The locals gave us some bananas and we ate them like we hadn't been fed for days! I treated the chafe with some good ol' Vaseline... and then I began to feel sick. I procrastinated for a while because of this and while Dion harassed me to get packing so we could go, I just laid back down instead, putting my hat over my eyes. Once I mustered up the energy to get back up, Dion and I had a quick chat, deciding that our motto for the rest of the journey was to "think of the girls" & that was it --- easy enough to remember and it held great significance. So it was now concrete: each time we felt down, or out --- "think of the girls" would be our inspiration; our 'pick me up'. The plan at this point of the track was to hike into the night until we got to Mt. Brigade, sleep for an hour or two, and then get hiking as far as we could the next day. So that is what we did, and it wasn't pretty --- just FYI to all reading this, night hiking is terrible; it is dangerous, stupid and downright idiotic. With a lack of sleep, sore legs and both Dion and I feeling under the weather, there were tantrums, abuse towards unsuspecting trees and the hurling of rocks. We had to navigate a handful of river crossings balanced upon sticks as thick as my little finger... the prize if you fell in? Oh, probably death. The final hurdle to Mt. Brigade was an incline of about 60 degrees and it felt like it took forever.

Although we were not close, in the darkness, Dion and I could hear one another swearing, yelling and venting to mother nature as the rain tried to wash us back down to the beginning... in truth, what it did for me personally was give a fresh dose of reality. “And you thought you were a man, didn’t you Al? Yeah, well you’re just a little boy... Where is your dummy Al, you want a dummy? Does the little boy want his dummy? Awwww.”

As you can see, I was full of positivity on that last leg. When we arrived at base camp, it was freezing. A cup of noodles helped Dion and I get warm, but it didn’t stop the feeling of sickness we both were now experiencing. The constant chills & cold flushes made it difficult to even close our eyes, but against all odds, it was lights out for at least 45 minutes.

### **KOKODA DAY 3 – Who’s your daddy, punk? Kokoda, that’s who.**

Some of you may be thinking what, Day 3 already? But it is only Sunday morning! Well, you’re both right and wrong. I am afraid this was it folks, the last time we attempted to sleep. We had 29 hours to get to the Kokoda airstrip and we had not even reached the highest point of the Kokoda yet --- basically we were behind, due to the weather conditions. The PNG boys were looking tired and sick, and both Dion and I were not faring much better.

We started to power on and as the sun rose in the distance, we could not be happier. By 10am, we were in a small village located in a valley, waving to a few village children --- I am sure they looked at me and thought, “why is that guy walking funny?” Yep, you guessed it --- by now, my bleeding, blistered chafe was a real hit in hero land! As we commenced our ascent to yet another small village, Dion became extremely pale and we had to stop. I was a little panicky and asked Dion to give me the satellite phone in case he passes out, but he said he was fine. We made it to the top of the hill and it was time to rest. I felt as terrible as Dion looked. The locals gave us some fresh vine tomatoes and potato which we wolfed down at a ridiculous pace, then after another 30 minutes, we knew we would have to keep going.

Dion and I reluctantly got up and for the next 6 hours, we power hiked until we reached a small village creatively called ‘1900’, it’s name owing to the fact that it is situated some 1900 metres above sea level. During this time, I cannot recall what I was thinking and to be honest, I think I thought about nothing. It was like I was in autopilot & I just wanted to sit down and rest. The feeling of severe isolation had kicked in, we were all about 50 meters apart and it is too hard to talk while you’re pushing yourself up a tough incline. I felt hopeless, helpless, alone and fragile - --- it’s not like you can stop in at an IGA and grab a soft drink or ring your buddy on your mobile phone, no, you have but one option, that is to keep hiking.

We arrived at 1900 trembling, the rain so cold that both Dion and I (even while hiking) were freezing. At 1900, we decided to break for at least 2 hours and relax. The boys cooked us some food and we changed in to our last set of semi-dry clothes. It was now the fourth time we had eaten the same meal --- pasta, with trout and dried fruit --- only this time, it didn’t go down so well. Dion had felt sick the day before after eating it and today it was my turn. After the first bite, I felt like vomiting so I put the bowl down and rolled over. “One mouthful, Al, that is not enough” I thought but I just couldn’t stomach anymore.

At 5pm, we started our last leg to Kokoda. The final hurdle was to the top of the Gap (the highest point of the Kokoda and then a very long down-hill journey with a handful of inclines in between). Both Dion and myself looked horrible, my chafe by now seemed to be getting more painful with each step & both Dion & I were still sick. We both knew the final night was going to be hell on earth, but at no stage did either of us complain. The hours went by and as I walked/hiked, I did everything to keep my mind off the pain I was experiencing both physically and emotionally. I wanted to break down and I knew Dion felt the same as we were both now suffering from regular cold flushes and dizzy spells. At one stage, I slipped off a small cliff and as Dion helped me up we both slipped which ended up with me landing on a stinging tree. With barbs now stuck in my hands and forearms, the pain, I decided was nothing. I tried so hard to think of what the girls were going through --- to find inspiration, but I just couldn't.

By 9pm, I was in a dark place emotionally, and in hindsight, I firmly believe that this is a place we sometimes need to go --- not just to cleanse our souls, but to face questions and make decisions about our life that are so easy to sidestep when we are in every day society --- allow me to elaborate. Each day, life throws challenges at us, but what it also often gives us is a set of alternatives --- so most decisions are made easy. The hard ones we bury down deep, choosing to stick with comfort even though it may not allow the best possible outcome. This type of behaviour becomes habitual and before you know it, you are on autopilot --- you basically just go with the flow. Many of us find it easy to dwell on the problems in our life, but not on the solutions --- and certainly not on what is really important to us. Mark Twain said it best: "Don't go around saying the world owes you a living. The world owes you nothing. It was here first."

Buddha had a more spiritual way of looking at life: "Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment."

Now, I do not have the solution to freeing oneself from the suppressed state many of us find ourselves in, but what I do believe is this: once you have conquered yourself, that is, your shallow self --- the self that is controlled by the ego, you empower your deeper self --- that is, the self that can free you from the social pressures of society and can bring you to a true state of inner harmony, where life as we know it takes a more simple form and one is able then to consciously control the way he/she lives. Tao Te Ching teaches us that instead of trying to be the mountain, be the valley of the universe, for in this way, all things will come to you. Now what I can tell you is this, that in the darkness of the night, upon the edge of a mountain, tired, exhausted, and in what has proved to be the hardest battle of my life to date --- physically and emotionally, it was time for me to face my inner self and reflect on my life --- in fact, I really had no choice!

By 6am, Dion and I had spoken only twice. Once when we had a brief period where we laughed and joked because we were over the mountain (both literally and metaphorically), and the second time was after we had a brief tiff after I accused Dion of lying to me because he said there were no more mountains to climb, yet for hours I found myself in a position of climbing mountains. Anyway, during those long hours, I made some decisions about my life, about what road I wanted to take when I arrived home, and I consciously brought up some difficult decisions I knew had to be made. But then, I ran out of things to think about, I was too tired to yell and abuse the trees or the track, my legs were bleeding and my knees were starting to give up. In a

nutshell, I collapsed on the ground and watched the sunrise. I had no idea where Dion was and I didn't care.

A short while later I woke up, I must have dozed off on my backpack --- though probably for only around 30 minutes or so, & as I rubbed my eyes, I started to feel really angry. I thought about the Kokoda, the weather and the first phone call I received from Saffron after she had been diagnosed. I thought about Evie and the conversations I had with her parents and the emails she had sent me. I thought about the email Kim had sent the day before we left. I almost went ballistic! I was over it & I had to finish this track! It was in this moment I took a butter knife out from my bag and began to cut my compression pants, I tore off the legs and turned them in to a pair of compression underwear --- even though I had cut them too short, meaning things weren't exactly staying in, I didn't care. I covered my chafe in Vaseline, got up and started marching at a serious pace. 20 minutes down the track, I ran into Dion. He looked at me. "We aren't going to make it, mate," he said "unless we go hard!" I was over it and I could see he was too, so after all that... WE STARTED TO RUN!!!

Ha-ha, unbelievable, I thought. I let Dion have his little laugh at my expense and the fact that PNG were now able to glimpse my partially exposed manhood... and that --- pardon the language --- is when "shit" got "real"! Dion went ahead of me in order to try to get coverage on his satellite phone. I caught up a short while later at a small village, where the women and kids also got a good laugh at my expense --- junk out and proud of it. Dion looked at me and told me that the flights he was told about had been wrong. There was no later flight in the day, only an 8am flight. We both sat down, devastated. It now appeared we were staying in Kokoda for... well, as long as we had to until the next plane flew a group out. Dion then received a call from his office and they advised they may be able to organize us a chartered plane, but we had to move quickly. Motivation was high --- we just wanted to get out of there. So we began to run again. Dion led the way at a ridiculous pace, one I could not sustain as my chafe was still giving me grief. 2 hours later, I found Dion at another village, he was on his phone again, but had also fallen down a steep part of the Kokoda and broken his wrist.

Now this guy is tough as nails, and when he again told me that we had 2 hours to make the chartered flight, I knew we would do it. Our guides told us we were 5 hours from the airport & they were probably right, but today was a different day. Dion and I kicked it in to third gear; we got to the bottom of the Kokoda fast and it was now just the final straight --- which felt like it lasted forever. I am not quite sure what I thought about for those last few kilometres, being on the flat after 63 hours --- up and down hills, ensured I got 6 blisters in record time, and when I finally arrived at the airstrip, it was all too much. I felt a few tears in my eyes, partly because of the sheer exhaustion, partly because it was over and partly because all I could think about was the night before and how many times I just wanted to quit had it been an option. As Dion and I sat under a small shed, we congratulated each other --- we had completed the Kokoda trail in 64 hours and 20 minutes. The Kokoda locals thought we were crazy and many came over to sit with us --- and tell us we were nuts, pun unintended! Our porters came in after us and the final hurdle was walking to the plane after our legs had seized up, or so I thought.

Once the plane left the ground, I was able to keep my eyes open long enough to see some of the Kokoda from the air. We were all shaking our heads in disbelief, wondering how we made it in

time. The human body is an amazing thing and we are often unaware of how far we can actually push ourselves. When we touched down in Moresby airport, all of a sudden, we were in a frantic rush. I had a towel around me and we needed to make it to the International Airport ASAP as our flight left in an hour! When we got there, we checked in, got changed and with not even enough time to have a shower, I can only imagine how bad we must have smelt. We then raced up to security, who almost didn't let us through on time and then finally... FINALLY, we made it... sitting in comfort on our Virgin Blue flight to Brisbane. At that stage, we started laughing, joking and talking about the trip, Dion was sitting a few aisles back from me so we yelled at each other and used our ever-apparent "broseph" sign language. Once the plane took off, Dion came and sat next to me and we ordered as much food as we could. In fact we spent over \$100 dollars on the food cart --- & it was awesome. Between mini naps, I couldn't help but stare at the flight attendants, not for any particular reason except for the fact I had a whole new appreciation for everything!!!

## **REFLECTION**

Comfort is the language of those that are happy to simply survive. It has now been a week since I finished the Kokoda and I am physically fully healed. Both Dion and I have become sick, which was to be expected after pushing our bodies to such a degree.

The pain was immense and the Kokoda trail really does give you nothing. Was the trip worth it? There is not a doubt in my mind that it was. Once I arrived in Brisbane, I was lucky enough to go and visit Evie and her family (I missed an earlier flight due to a well-earned sleep in). The smile on the face of both her and her family made every ounce of pain disappear. To know in some way that Dion, my team, the community who got behind us and I had made some kind of difference in their lives was a feeling like no other. Edith Wharton once said that there:

"Are two ways of spreading light; to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it" In many ways, I am more than thankful for the support I received, & the willingness by Dion to accompany me (prior to this we had never actually met). I was inspired by my team mates --- Adam, Spencer and Lamar who stood by my side while planning the journey, and I was motivated by the amount of people who came out of the cracks and crevices to lend a hand. These people are our candles and our mirrors in society, for as each of us develops the strength to strive for a more positive world --- a more just society, the path that is lit cannot be walked alone and so we rely on each other.

So where to go from here? Ellie Wheeler Wilcox quoted: "Always continue to climb. It is possible for you to do whatever you choose, if you first get to know who you are and are willing to work with a power that is greater than ourselves to do it."

Victor Kiam made it sound simple: "Even if you fall on your face, you're still moving forward."

I could go on and on, but the message is simple --- you are the captain of your own ship, the person behind the wheel. If you take nothing else out of what you have read but inspiration, that is all you need. Make the positive changes in your life, challenge your limitations, for only when

you do will you find that your perimeters expand and your capabilities continue to grow. Last but not least, don't do it all for yourself, take the time to reach out to others, to help them, to unlock their own potential --- when you do, you will find that life has more purpose and meaning.