

SIXTY TWO SIMPLE STICKS

A report by Paul Ashenden from News Ltd on Tuesday August 30, 2011 at Brigade Hill.

Paul joined Wayne Enright of Free Spirit Adventures, for a journey along the Kokoda Track on behalf of Legacy.

They poked out of the ground at the top of Brigade Hill, each with a piece of white ribbon on top.

62 simple sticks.

Each represented a young life lost as the Australian Maroubra Force defended its position against the advancing Japanese.

62 simple sticks.

A solemn silence descended on us as we walked through them on the grassy knoll and surveyed the magnificent vistas surrounding us.

Brigade Hill, along with Isurava, was one of the two major defensive stances made by the Australians during the Kokoda campaign.

Brigade Hill and neighbouring Mission Ridge were also where the South Australian Battalion - the 2/27th - saw action for the first time in Papua.

Among the 2/27th was my grandfather, Private Stirling Ashenden, and four of his brothers.

I was walking in their footsteps, treading where they trod.

The goosebumps were back again.

62 simple sticks.

They also represented the 39 men from the 2/27th who died at Mission Ridge and during the subsequent withdrawal.

My grandfather's peers.

My grandfather's mates.

I never really spoke to him about the war but my father reckons he said the track was "a bastard of a place".

It looks more like paradise to me but I can only imagine the horrors he and his mates encountered here.

62 simple sticks.

We walked past them along the knoll and sat in the shade, and listened to a couple of readings which described the action where we rested.

One told the story of the lost men of the 2/27th - and how they became stuck behind enemy lines on September 8, 1942.

They were forced to cut a path through the jungle carrying their wounded and no food. First to Menari and then to the south of Owers' Corner.

They were lost for two weeks. Some survived, some did not.

The second reading described the bayonet charge of the Australians on Brigade Hill after they had been outflanked by the Japanese.

We sat, silent, at the end of each reading, then stood along the ridge with our hats in our hands as group member Barry, whose father was in the 2/27th, fought with his emotions to get through the Ode of Remembrance.

By the time we played the Last Post - on an iPod dock Wayne had brought along for this purpose - tears were streaming down my face and I was not crying on my own.

Each of us stood silently gathering our thoughts and composing ourselves before gradually meandering back through the sticks.

The 62 simple sticks.

We had an early lunch at Brigade Hill, interrupted by a visiting helicopter, before continuing on toward Efogi.

We had left Menari late, about 7.30am, after visiting the local school and listening to the students sing for us .

Our donation for the early morning concert would help transport supplies and furniture to the school.

It had been a steep climb to Brigade Hill and after lunch it was mostly downhill to the villages of Efogi and Efogi 2 - our campsite for the night.

Wayne had stayed here with some trekkers the previous week and had treated a little girl around two years old for a bad machete cut on her foot.

It appears her parents had ignored advice to get her to hospital and the infection was spreading up her leg. Barry, a paramedic, examined the wound. He told her parents she would die if she was not properly treated. Hopefully they will listen this time.

We are at the half way point of the track and it has been a day I will never forget.

It was a day of remembrance, of tributes to our forefathers.

To my grandfather and his mates.



It was a day that 62 simple sticks brought grown men and women to tears.