

TURIA PITT

Against all odds

Still recovering from a gruelling Ironman, the burns survivor conquers a new goal

"All Australians should do it," says Turia Pitt (on the Kokoda Track in May).



Papua New Guinea's stifling heat "was out of control," says Pitt.



"The porters are amazing," says Pitt (with her porter, Noel). "The amount of times the porter saved my life ..."



After Kokoda, Pitt had yet another operation to treat her burns.

PAYING RESPECT
While walking the historic track, where hundreds of Australians died during World War II, "You stop at places that are sacred for Australians," says Pitt. "It added a whole other element to it which I haven't seen on other adventures."



Pitt (left) navigated a water crossing with porter Noel.

She was just hours into what would be a 96km, nine-day trek and Turia Pitt had already hit the wall. The 28-year-old, who suffered burns to 65 per cent of her body in a bushfire during a 100km ultramarathon in WA's Kimberley in 2011, had just set off on Papua New Guinea's Kokoda Track on May 23, with hopes to finish it by June 1. But the oppressive heat was proving a formidable barrier. "It was so hot," Pitt, who has undergone more than 100 operations, tells WHO. "Because of my burns I find it hard to regulate my temperature and even though we only walked for two hours it was the hardest day."

But as Australians know, Turia Pitt is a stayer. Nine days later, walking for medical charity Interplast (see box, p. 41), the former WA mining engineer finished the historic trail, which runs from outside Port Moresby to the north coast of the PNG peninsula, and is significant to Australians for the unforgiving battles played out there between the Allies and Japan during World War II. The track takes about 50 hours' walking time, almost all of which are spent descending or ascending. "It holds such an important place in our history," says Pitt, who lives with fiancé Michael Hoskin in Ulladulla, on the NSW South Coast. "And everyone who attempts the trek talks about how gruelling it is, so for me that meant I wanted to give it a go myself."

So less than a month after finishing Ironman Australia (a 3.8km swim, 180km cycle and 42km marathon in NSW's Port Macquarie), the woman doctors said would never walk again took off on a hike of nearly 100km over mountainous and treacherous terrain. This is her diary.

MONDAY, MAY 23
We caught a plane to Papua New Guinea and rode a train for three hours before beginning the trek. It was sooo hot and even though we only walked for two hours it was the hardest day. I thought if I can't even do day one—because apparently day one is meant to be really easy; the terrain was easy,

mostly flat—how the hell am I going to get through the whole nine days? It was just so hot.

TUESDAY, MAY 24
On day two, in the first five minutes, we hit a huge mountain. It took us four hours to get to the top. It was almost vertical but it was nice when you got into the mountains because it got cooler. When we got to the top, a lot of us were a bit rattled because it was really hard.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 25
Every single day, you would go up three times

and down two times. You would get to the top of the mountain and you would think, "Yes!" But then you would have to go down. And for me down is so much worse, as it's super slippery on all of this yellow clay—it's all wet because it's been raining the night before. I think by day two you are used to it, but in the back of my mind I knew the days were going to be long—they are 12-hour days. If you thought you were going to get the day done in six hours you would kind of kill yourself.

"A lot of us were a bit rattled; it was really hard"

I have a porter, Noel. I am fully dependant on him; I couldn't walk



Pitt with her fellow trekkers, who took on Kokoda to raise money for the medical charity Interplast.

The terrain includes a log bridge over a fast-flowing stream.



DEATH DEFYING

On the third day of Pitt's Kokoda hike, one member of her team, who were all raising money for Interplast, fell 25m down a cliff. She was rescued by porters and carried to a nearby village. "She's home now and feeling OK," says Pitt.



"Every day I hung at the back of the group," says Pitt. "I wanted to enjoy the walk as much as possible."

Pitt was assisted by Noel up a steep incline.



anywhere without him. You put your foot down and you slip, so a couple of times the porter Noel just grabbed the back of my shirt. And as I walked down the mountain he would be holding me. It is quite dangerous. You have to tread with caution, concentrate and watch where you are going.

FRIDAY, MAY 27

Today we trekked the slippery trails to Mount Bellamy (altitude 2,190m), the highest point of our trek. To hear the stories from Kokoda is one thing, but to come here and see it for yourself is really incredible. [Six-hundred and twenty-five Australians died there during the World War II campaign in which Japan tried to seize Port Moresby, from where it planned to launch an invasion of Australia.]

It's hard to put into words the

significance of this place, and how it feels to walk in the footsteps of the Australian soldiers—what was it really like for them? You can't help but feel like you're connected to that history, and it's deeply humbling.

There are memorials all the way along; the Australian government has built a lot of the memorials.

"I've been missing Michael"

At the start, in the middle of it there is what is called Brigade Hill, where a big battle was fought. I thought the wartime history of Kokoda would become more clear when I was there, but it left me more confused. You can't get your head around the fact there was a war fought there. How did they get guns over the mountains? And the track is so slippery and so skinny and mountainous, it's really hard to get your head around it.

We went to church in Naduri today,

Pitt posed with her fellow hikers at a camping site on the track.



With a fellow hiker on June 1.

where I was put on the spot and asked to share my story in front of hundreds of people! I then instigated running races with the local kids and we ran on the airstrip there. So much fun to muck around with the kids and the trekkers. We've become a pretty tight team.

SUNDAY, MAY 29

People said that after Ironman, trekking Kokoda would be a walk in the park but it's way more challenging than I expected. It's a real physical challenge for all of us—the mud, the blisters, creek after creek, and all those hills. I've been missing Michael and thinking about home a lot today.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 1

We finished the track today. Tonight we had a dinner with the Interplast team in Port Moresby. This is my reason why we are here. We met up with the local surgeon and plastics trainee Dr Morath Maire, Interplast volunteer surgeon Dr Peter Maloney and a local patient whose future has been changed as a direct result of Interplast's work.

I loved that my trekkers got to see first hand how the funds they've raised have such a huge impact. It was a touching end to our trip. Now I can't wait to get home tomorrow and see Michael and Mum!

My porter carved for me a stick. I was pretty upset to say goodbye. He was now walking back to the start to do the trek again with another group.

I'm so grateful to everyone who supports me, and that I get the chance to experience this sacred place. It's something I'm never going to forget.

■ By Emma Martin

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When she had finished, Pitt was sad to say farewell to her porter, Noel: "I think we become more attached to them than they do to us."

WHY I WALKED THE TRACK



Pitt told her harrowing story of survival to locals in Naduri (on May 27).

Turia Pitt took on the Kokoda Track to raise money for Interplast, a charity that provides surgery and medical training in 17 Asia-Pacific countries. Their mission statement is to "repair bodies and rebuild lives." The fundraising venture, sponsored by Mountain Designs, was dubbed "Turia's Kokoda Trek" and has so far raised nearly \$400,000.

"We are so lucky in Australia to have access to medical services," says Pitt. "One boy in PNG had never been to school because he had a cleft lip. Interplast operated on him and now he is going to school. In village life, when you are really sick or have trouble giving birth, it's life or death. To me, the Interplast volunteers are miracle workers."

MICK FINN (7)