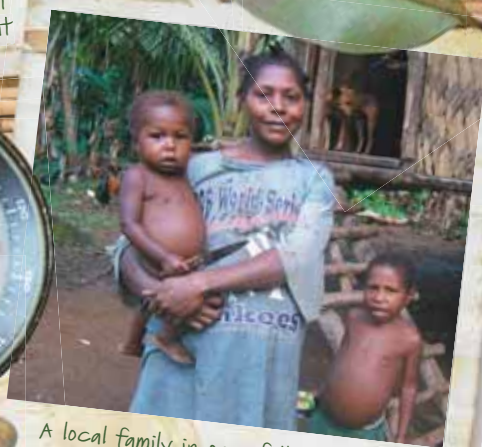




The Pirie family and friends overlook Wau at the halfway mark on their 'extreme' trek in New Guinea.



A surviving anti-aircraft gun from World War II at Salamaua



A local family in one of the isolated villages in New Guinea. Notice the young boy has a knife already.

# family trek

In an amazing accomplishment, the Pirie family from Port Macquarie has just completed the first New Guinea North to South group trek crossing.

**T**his 'extreme trek' was organised by Drew and Russell Pirie in July 2008 – to take their sons and a couple of friends across New Guinea in the areas where their father Andy had operated with the Commandos during WWII.

We commenced by flying across the Owen Stanleys from Port Moresby to Lae on the North Coast. We then travelled by boat back across the Huon Gulf to start walking from Salamaua – one of the Japanese bases on the North Coast that was successfully raided by the Commandos in mid 1942.

These days Salamaua remains a peaceful isolated settlement of grassed native huts on the beachfront – resembling a south sea island paradise like Tonga. The Pirie group was able to inspect several old anti aircraft guns still standing in the jungle around the Salamaua peninsula.

We then crossed the Francisco River, aided by native guides who assisted us on ropes across the chest-deep, fast flowing waters – only half an hour into the first day's trekking!

We followed the valleys and many creek crossings up to Kunai Ridges through Komiatum to Mt. Tambu at about 1,200 metres the second day. On the third day, we walked down through jungle creek crossings – once again with many log crossings and with boots constantly wet from walking knee deep in creeks.

By lunch we reached Mubo Village – once again

accessible by crossing the major Buisival River chest deep on ropes and aided by native guides. Mubo was also a site of many actions and raids by the Commandos during WWII. At this village, we left laminated photos of Andy's patrol in 1942 and also a copy of his book 'Commando Double Black'. Even though most of the villagers were unable to read, they could enjoy the pictures and the 'pidgin' explanations of our guides.

The remainder of the day involved a 1,000 metre climb up never-ending jungle ridges to the fortress like location of Godagasel Village, at about 1,400 metres – looking out over the Buisival and Bitoi Gorges below.

Like every morning, the group was up at 4:30am in the dark, packed and ready to leave by first light – using headlamps – for another 10 or 12 hour trek.

The next day involved scrambling around mountain ledges and landslides – hanging over precipices above the Buisival Gorge below, on the way around jungle ridges to Skindiwai. Here we were able to leave the local native villagers some laminated photos of Andy Pirie and the 2/5th Commandos – taken by Damien Parer, war time photographer in WWII.

That night, the Pories kept the local villagers entertained with their own 'sing-sing', accompanied by Drew's Harmonica and Russell on the ukulele. A local villager had just shot a 'cus cus' (tree kangaroo) with his bow and arrow, and we were able to sit around the fire while they put it whole, fur, intestines and all, on the fire in front of us to cook.

Another pre-dawn start took us even higher, up around 2,000 metres, before crossing the first section of the Owen Stanleys and down into the valley of Wau.

Russell was amazed that Wau – the only town of any size on the whole trip from Lae to Moresby – was actually so small and ramshackle. There were no Police, no rules and no visible order.

It was here we met the first 'white-pela' we'd seen for a week. Tim Vincent, who, with

his wife Daniele ran the local store, gave the group a much needed rest at their compound and an interesting 4WD tour around the town. And yes, you did need a 4WD to negotiate the streets of Wau – they were that bad!

We were able to handle some magnificent wild

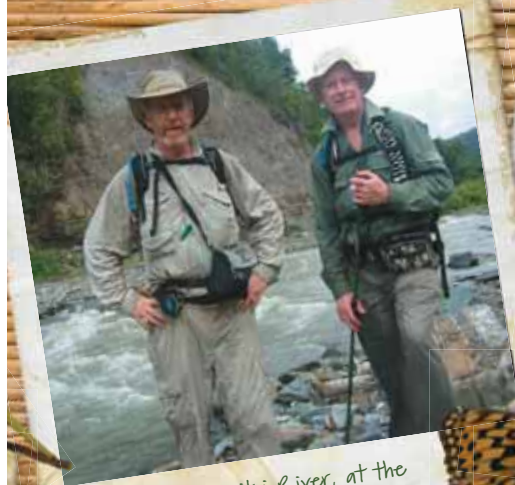
butterflies with 25 cm wingspans and 30 cm long stick insects! We also saw many spiders larger than your hand in webs as big as two story houses.

In the Wau Valley we were able to identify the Wandumi Ridge and other locations where heroic battles were fought in rearguard actions by Captain Sherlock and 2/6th Commandos in the famous Battle for Wau – before the town was saved at the last minute by reinforcements from the 17th Brigade.

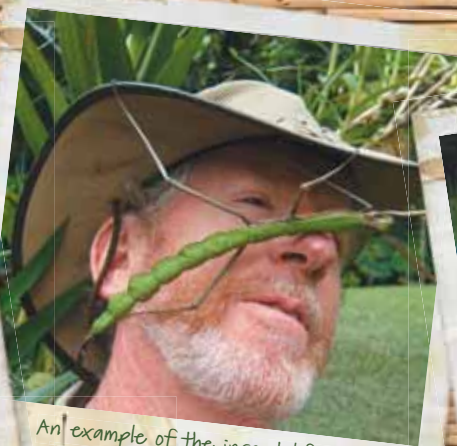
After a much needed day's rest and cleanup, the group trekked even higher up through Winema and once again over 2,000 metres into the isolated village of Kudjeru, where very few people had seen 'white pelas' since the war. Once again we shared their unique culture around the campfire at night, accompanied by another 'sing-sing'.

Day eight was always going to be a big day – described in the pre-trek notes as 'the mountain that will kill you'. It involved leaving pre-dawn under headlamps and trekking for 13 hours straight up a further 700 metres to almost 2,700 metres (9,000 ft) through thick jungle covered in deep, slippery moss and countless creek crossings – again, all before lunch! Then slipping and clambering along razorback ridgelines before descending about 1,600 metres (4,000 ft) back down into the valleys below. This was a totally exhausting day for all, and it didn't finish until we slid down landslide slopes into a river crossing in the dark. The over-





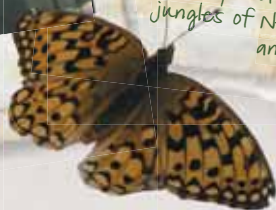
Crossing the Bitoi River, at the Buisival Gorge Junction.



An example of the insect life from the jungles of New Guinea ... up close and personal.



One of the many river crossings, which was dangerous when crossing rapids and waterfalls.



night rains had quickly caused the water levels to rise to waist deep.

That night, totally exhausted, we slept under some grassed huts out of the rain – only to find in the morning that it was where the pigs and chooks normally slept!

The next two days were equally exhausting but spectacular trekking, as the group followed the mighty Eloa Gorge downstream for 12 hours each day – constantly crossing the raging rapids and waterfalls either on slippery log crossings or waist deep by foot crossings.

In the early days, we had cameras and movie cameras capturing each log or river crossing, but after doing it hundreds of times each day it became more a case of surviving the crossings and keeping the gear dry, as the rivers gained in intensity downstream.

Needless to say, every day each and every trekker had several falls – either off slippery logs, slippery river boulders or just collapsing landslides down precipitous slopes above the gorges.

The last days were spent back in the lowland country of the Lakakamu Valley – slogging through never ending swamps and tree roots with shin deep mud and creek crossings again, before finally catching a boat ride down the spectacular Avi Avi and Lakakamu Rivers for several hours to the South Coast. Here we were able to see the isolated native villages, which relied on fishing and river trade in beetle nuts for their livelihood. The boys, although hot and exhausted, declined to hang over the side of the boats due to the potential for 'pukpuk' crocodile attacks in the water.

Russell says it was a miracle none of us were seriously injured, although every one of us suffered in some shape or form. Some of us had fevers from blood infections, some had swollen, infected bites from leeches and mozzies, some collapsed from sheer heat exhaustion and dehydration, leading to diarrhoea and vomiting.

Every one of us had wet feet, boots and clothing constantly all day – with no way to dry them out before heading off the next day. They were always wet, or damp and smelly, thus contributing to rashes and fungal problems. Your clothes, tent, sleeping gear and utensils were always dirty and

wet. Leather went green mouldy, water bottles and Camelbacks got algae infected, even with water treatment pills.

Like the troops before us, we soon dumped or gave away surplus gear and filthy clothes we didn't have time to try and clean. Many of the expensive European 'trekking poles', although invaluable, did not make the full journey, bending or breaking under the constant pressure. They were often needed like 'ice picks' to desperately hold on to a slippery ledge, for fear of sliding into a gorge below.

Luckily, the Pirie boys included two young doctors, an ambulance paramedic and sports physio trainer, who were constantly dishing out antibiotic pills, creams and plastering and taping blisters, peeling, rotting feet, skin

rashes, cuts and scratches from sharp projecting sticks and rocks, and strapping knees and ankles from various falls.

Feet alone took exhausted trekkers 30 minutes every night to clean, dry and treat and bandage. With 4 o'clock wake ups every morning and early dawn starts, there was no time then.

Despite the hardships, the trekking was superb – an unbelievable variety of scenery, village life and lovely native hospitality.

What constantly amazed me was the isolation of these little villages in such remote locations in the jungle and the friendly, innocent natives who lived there. In each case the villages consisted of only a few small thatched huts with about twenty people gathered around. But these villages were in such beautiful locations – perched high on mountain ridges with spectacular valley views, or beside some spectacular clear mountain rivers, raging rapids, clear pools and green valleys. They each were generally self sufficient, living off sweet potatoes, bananas, taro plants, fish from the rivers, or birds and cactus they would shoot with bows and arrows.

Every day our group would have to change porters as we passed through different tribal lands, and our head guide, 'TAU', a PNG native who

spoke good Pidgin and Motu, was able to coordinate these groups each time.

The native porters were much smaller than us, but God, they were so strong and agile. Dressed only in an old pair of shorts – sometimes a T-shirt or no top at all – bare footed and skipping across the logs and rocks all day without stumbling at all.

They were usually there to help us across dangerous crossings and along rope assisted ledges, where we could have fallen hundreds of feet to our death.

At one stage, the group of porters we had were direct descendants of the infamous 'kukukuku' headhunting tribe of the upper Eloa Valley. They couldn't speak English, but were wonderful to us in this difficult terrain and were very proud of their wild heritage – much like a Samurai Warrior would be.

Another fascinating note Russell made on the trek was how it seemed each and every young boy in the villages would virtually grow up with a Machete 'bush knife' in his hand. All the porters carried these huge machetes, a couple of foot long – razor sharp for carving out a path for us through the constant jungle. But in every village we would see young boys from only 3 or 4 years old running wild in the bush – also with their very own razor sharp machetes. Then, to our surprise, we would also see mothers with babes in arms – scarcely one year old – and even these youngsters would be carrying great carving knives – waving them around their mothers' necks while they were being carried!

The absolutely exhausted party arrived back safely this week after 2 weeks we'll never forget. The suffering over 2 weeks was nothing compared to what the troops put up with for more than 12 months, in isolated and raw jungle recognised as some of the worst war conditions soldiers have ever faced. It truly is the 'green armour' of impenetrable terrain and climate that helped save Australia.

"We only had to survive for 2 weeks, not 12 months," said Russell. "We had good food ration packs, but even they became 'same like' and some

ended up eating rice and vegemite. We enjoyed native food and fruit where available, but didn't have to live on it or nothing at all like the troops. We really had it easy all round compared to them, and we weren't being shot at! We had tents, aircell bed mats, modern, light clothes, sleeping bags and packs. They often had rags many months old, worn out boots and sat in a wet foxhole with a ground sheet to protect them. They did it tough."

Russell returned to Port over 4 kg lighter – losing several notches on his belt after only two weeks. This was after already having trained for 4 months beforehand in 'Studio 1 Bootcamps' and climbing North Brother Mountain many times for practice. He described the trek more like wading through swamps, crossing creeks for a couple of hours, then climbing Mt Seaview before 9 am in the morning, then more of the same each day, all day, in 35 degree heat and 95 per cent humidity.

It dawned on us during the latter part of the trek that we were walking over narrow jungle paths only a handspan wide that had probably been used by these native people for many thousands of years in this same terrain – just as old as our Aboriginal heritage. But the difference here was that these tracks have not changed for all that time – they're still constantly overgrown and raw. Where else in the world could you find any tracks or paths that haven't changed due to civilization for tens of thousands of years?

"The treks achieved all we'd hoped for, and we all made it safely," said Russell. "We were the first trek group to do both tracks and go coast to coast, north to south. We were the first trek group to walk uphill from Salamaua to Wau (The Black Cat/ Buisival Gorge Route) and we were the first group to walk the original Bulldog Track from Wau over the Owen Stanleys (nearly 10,000 ft) down to the Lakakamu Valley (The Bulldog Trek)."

Each of these treks is a true 'Grade 8' difficulty, and to combine them into one trek of almost two weeks was an outstanding achievement. Even the PNG Trekking guide, an ultra marathon adventure racer, had never done these treks before, and he described them as the most difficult and spectacular treks he had ever done!