

blackcat trek

An exciting trek crossing Papua New Guinea from North to South has been planned by the Pirie family for July this year. Keeping the spirit of the ANZACS alive, the trek retraces the footsteps of Australian Commandos in WW II.



Pictured is Andy with his son Russell, who will be taking the trek.

Andy Pirie is now 85 years old – living in Port Macquarie NSW and a former President of the Australian Commando Association.

During WW II he was a Commando with the 2/5th Independent Company Commandos who, in 1941, were airlifted to Wau in the isolated highlands of New Guinea. As a small group of a few hundred men, they operated behind enemy lines from Wau, down through the Northern Valleys of the Owen Stanleys to the Coast around Salamaua and Lae.

They were the first unit in the war to carry out a successful raid on Japanese positions – where they dealt heavy casualties and damage to the fortified base of the Japanese at Salamaua, before escaping back into the mountainous jungle terrain.

They operated and raided in the Salamaua, Mubo and Wau area, as well as the Markham Valley, for over a year with very little provisions or support. They came to be known as the "Ragged Arse 5th" due to their appearance from living in the jungle conditions as Commandos.

Their efforts helped prevent the Japanese from advancing over the mountains to capture Wau Airport in the highlands and gaining access to attack Port Moresby.

Some months later, the Japanese did manage to advance over the Kokoda track in large numbers, and the scale of that campaign has become more famous – with many Australians now undertaking

the Kokoda Track in remembrance of the difficult conditions. Kokoda, like Gallipoli, is now becoming a "must do" for young, fit Australian travellers wanting to experience what their fathers had to go through in their youth.

This year, in tribute to Andy Pirie and the many members of the Commandos who had operated in the even more remote areas from Wau to Lae, members of the Pirie Family have organised an "Extreme Trek", with guidance from a well known PNG Trekking Company.

The Papua New Guinea Tourism Board will be sending an Australian film unit with the group, to document the historic crossing ...

Andy's two sons, Drew (from Mudgee) and Russell (from Port Macquarie) – both now around 60 years old – together with their sons, Gordon, Adrian, and Doug, nephew Brad, and a couple of close friends, Des

Walker and Alan Hill of Mudgee, will be travelling from Lae on the North Coast of Papua, across to Salamaua and trekking a week up the infamous BlackCat - Skindewai track. They will traverse boggy mangrove swamps and climb to almost 2,000 metres high, along the same trails that the Commandos operated during WWII.

This track has been done recently by a few avid trekkers and was described by a British SAS officer as "level 8" difficulty – only fit for masochists and Israeli Paratroopers!

After a day's break in Wau from this gruelling trek, The Pirie group will then attempt something that has never been done before by any commercial group of trekkers: to continue even higher across the Owen Stanleys, over 2,500 metres

(9,800 feet) – again on the trails that the Commandos took when they had to get supplies into these isolated areas of New Guinea. The trek will then take them down the mighty Eloa River Valley to "Bulldog", where they will follow the Lakakamu River to the coast and then back to Port Moresby.

This overall trek will take about two weeks and will cover some of the most isolated and raw jungle country in the world. Sections of the trek are through areas that have seen very few Europeans at all – especially since WW II. Some footage exists of this area in the famous photography work of Damien Parer – wartime filmmaker.

It will be the first time any group has attempted to walk across Papua New Guinea from the North Coast to the South since the Commandos in WW II.

The Papua New Guinea Tourism Board will be sending an Australian Film Unit with the group to document the historic crossing; the film may also be used for future tourism purposes.

Russell Pirie's commented, "To say we will be tired is an absolute understatement. We will be totally exhausted.

But it is something I've wanted to do all my life and now we are going to show our kids how our fathers spent their lives from ages 19 to 26 years old – to give us the lifestyle we now enjoy in Australia. As the old ANZACS gradually die off, it's our way of remembering them forever."

The team at Focus wishes the Pirie family all the best for the trek and look forward to bringing you the full story of their experiences upon their return.