

Kenneth Ward - Kokoda

Linda Graham

I recently returned from walking the Kokoda Trail. When people asked “How was it?” the first words which came to mind were amazing, unbelievable, emotional, challenging, beautiful and peaceful. To me it was an experience of the heart, one of being there and seeing which makes it so difficult to put into words.

After spending ten days walking the trail I now have the slightest inkling why families have said “They never talk about it” when their men and women returned from war. I believe it is something that lives within them, their own experience which cannot be expressed only “felt” as there are no words to describe the emotion.

Walking along the trail under a blue sky, dry ground beneath my feet, a small backpack containing a few personal items with a porter providing assistance, I could only imagine what it would have been like for the soldiers who in 1942, walked the trail in totally different circumstances and under such difficult conditions.

On many occasions I was overwhelmed with emotion listening to the stories narrated by our Trek Leader. To be in the actual sites along the trail where so many Australians lost their lives or performed heroic feats made the experience real. These were not just stories but actual events of a period in history which transformed Australia to be what it is today. I cannot express my gratitude enough to the men and woman who showed persistence, courage and a deep love of their country, who fought and died for future generations.

Moments which are forged in me forever were the special ceremonies our Trek Leader organised at “Brigade Hill” and “Surgery Rock” and of course the dawn service at Isurava overlooking the Kokoda Gap. Not to mention of course the beauty of the Owen Stanley Ranges with its magnificent tall trees, jungles, undergrowth, river crossings, flowers and the villages scattered across the mountain sides. I only have to think Kokoda and all the feelings and memories rise to the surface.

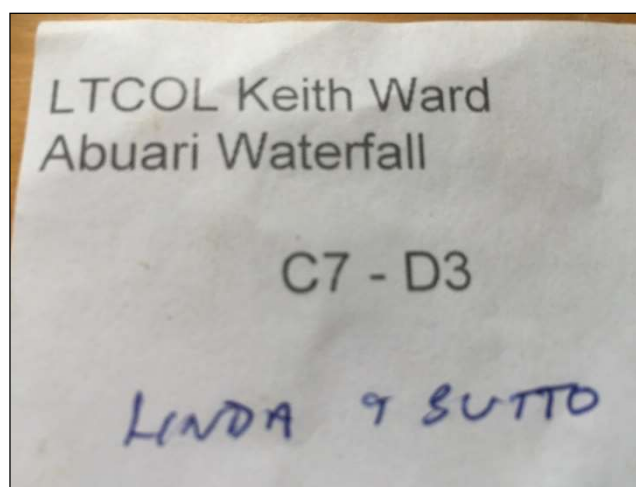
Prior to embarking on my trip I contacted Rosemary Phillis at the Riverstone Historical Society to see if there were any fallen soldiers buried in Papua New Guinea she would like me to visit. Rosemary replied requesting if possible to visit Bomana War Cemetery to pay respect to Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth Harry Ward of the 53rd Infantry Battalion who was ambushed and killed by Japanese troops on 27 August 1942 above the waterfall near Abuari Village.

Whilst flying to Port Moresby I read the notes Rosemary provided me about Kenneth Harry Ward and safely tucked them away with my travel documents. On the night of arrival at Sogeri Lodge we repacked our gear into backpacks for our porters to carry and left our valuable items behind. It wasn't until we were part way along the trail the next day that I realised I had left the information about Kenneth Harry Ward behind at the lodge. I spoke with the Trek Leader advising him there was a soldier I needed to visit at Bomana Cemetery, that I knew his name and had a good idea of where to find his headstone. My Trek Leader advised he could request the driver to get the information from my envelope and bring them on the bus as we were being collected from the airport after flying back from Kokoda and going directly to the cemetery. I was satisfied with this arrangement.

It wasn't until we arrived at Bomana Cemetery after ten days walking the trail I realised we had not received the paperwork I left at the lodge, but I wasn't overly concerned as I knew I would find Kenneth Harry Ward.

Before the group commenced walking through the cemetery our Trek Leader placed us in pairs and randomly handed out a small slip of paper and two poppies. He requested we go and spend time with the soldier whose name and location was on the paper.

The sheet of paper which was given to me and Sutto had the name "LTCOL Keith Ward Abuari Waterfall". I checked the location of the headstone which was noted as "C7 - D3" My first comment to Sutto was "Keith Ward's headstone is located in approximately the same area as Kenneth Harry Ward's".



**Photo of the sheet of paper given to Linda to search for in the cemetery.
Photos: Linda Graham**

We walked slowly down the rows and rows of white headstones checking each one. When we located Row "C7" we then moved to the headstone "D3". To my absolute astonishment the headstone read "Kenneth Harry Ward". Just writing this now gives me the same shiver I experienced on that day. I stood there speechless. I looked at Sutto in complete shock ... "No...this just can't be" I said. I was thrilled that we had found Kenneth Harry Ward but said to Sutto we had to go and check the main registry which was located at the entrance of the cemetery to look for the correct location of "Keith Ward". Upon carefully going through the names of soldiers of which there were many, there was no Keith Ward. I rechecked the registry for Kenneth Harry Ward's records which reconfirmed the numbers shown on the small slip of paper... it was those for Kenneth not Keith.

I was totally overwhelmed and ran back to Kenneth's headstone. I dropped to my knees and began to cry... I just couldn't believe it. This was too coincidental!!

Sutto and I sat and spoke with Kenneth Harry Ward for a few minutes and placed our poppies at the base of his headstone. I then walked quickly up the centre of the cemetery to see the Trek Leader to ask if he had given me the sheet of paper knowing that this was the soldier I was coming to visit. My leader looked at me dumbfounded ... again I am experiencing that shiver ... he advised he randomly handed the slips out amongst the group and apologised that he had forgotten to organise the documents from the lodge to be delivered to the cemetery.

My Trek Leader looked at me... he too seemed a little teary and gave me a hug. We could not believe that this event had occurred. He then realised which soldier I was looking for and had no idea that the small sheet had an incorrect spelling being Keith instead of Kenneth. My Trek Lead then reminded me of our visit to the Abuari waterfall when he talked of the heroics of Kenneth Ward and the 53rd battalion... at the time it had not registered with me it was THE Kenneth Harry Ward.

We stood there in the middle of Bomana Cemetery on that magnificent sunny day realising that this was indeed a “miracle” with my Trek Leader advising there had definitely been some divine intervention.

I walked alone back to revisit Kenneth Harry Ward and spoke with him of the events that had lead me to him. Whilst sitting at the headstone under the warm PNG sun telling Kenneth of my experience, a light breeze came across the cemetery. I believe this was a sign of thanks from Kenneth Harry Ward for coming to visit.



Kenneth's headstone and the row marker at the Bomana Cemetery.

Photos: Linda Graham

What a way to finish my time in PNG ... unbelievable.

So I strongly encourage people to visit Papua New Guinea to walk the Kokoda Trail and visit our war heroes. I am so pleased that I made the decision and put in the training to walk in the footsteps of our brave Australian soldiers. The memories of this sad yet beautiful place will remain with me always and I will be forever grateful to those who laid down their lives for me.

I am a proud Australian, I love my country and its people past and present ... I am totally “blessed”.



Headstones in the Bomana Cemetery.

Photo: Linda Graham



Monument and Headstones in the Bomana Cemetery.

Photo: Linda Graham