



Mehdi Ahmadi wore the same hobnailed leather boots as the Australian soldiers. 172250

Picture: STEWART CHAMBERS

Kokoda trek gives a new take on life

By Kyra Gillespie

Reliving the conditions faced by Australian soldiers during the Kokoda Track campaign has changed how one Pakenham student sees life.

Mehdi Ahmadi has just come home from Papua New Guinea after walking in the footsteps of the Australian soldiers who fought to hold off the Japanese during World War II.

He spent 10 days wearing the army uniform of the period, carrying an original rifle and eating the same food as the World War II diggers.

Despite having arrived in Australia just two years ago from war-ravaged Afghanistan, the Pakenham Secondary College student said this latest adventure has made him realise how lucky he was.

"It was an amazing and emotional experience," Mehdi said.

"It has changed how I see life."

The 17-year-old was given the opportunity after writing an Harold Bould Kokoda Award-winning essay. English is Mehdi's second language, which makes his accomplishments as a writer all the more impressive.

The trek from 7-17 July marks 75 years since Australians first arrived in Papua New Guinea and the beginning of the Kokoda legend.

In recognition of the milestone, Mehdi and 16 other trekkers completed the 100km journey while mimicking the conditions that Australian soldiers endured while fighting in Papua New Guinea between 1942 and 1945.

The trekkers had to replicate the entire war experience - the clothing, the food, the sleeping arrangements, the contents of their backpacks and even the original leather boots that the soldiers wore.

"These are the boots that we had to wear," Mehdi said, pulling the stiff boots out of his backpack.



Above: Trekking through the jungle.

Right: Each member of the group carried an original 303 Lee Enfield rifle used during WWII, weighing up to 7kgs each.



On the soles of the boots were metal hobnails which the soldiers nailed on to stop them from slipping down the steep slopes of the trail.

"The leather was really hard in the mornings and boiling hot as the day went on.

"I got massive blisters on the second day, but my father was in the army and had taught me that the best thing to do with blisters is to open them right up to dry them out.

"So each time we stopped I would take off my shoes, open them up and change the bandage."

On the menu were rations of bully beef and rice, tea, porridge, and the occasional piece of campfire damper.

But the organisers had forgotten that Mehdi could only eat certain foods.

"I could only eat the rice because of Halal. Luckily I got hold of one quarter of an onion to put with the rice.

"I'd never eaten those kinds of foods before. I'm not a fussy eater but my body wasn't used to it and tried to reject it. I had very little energy.

"We were only given one litre of water a day so we would have to

rely on finding a small flowing water source to fill our bottles, which was difficult because we were so high up in the mountains."

In acknowledgment of the anniversary, each trekker took on the name of an Australian soldier, complete with their original log books and dog tags.

Mehdi was assigned the name of Henry Evans, a soldier who died in the early stages of the war.

"The group got to know each other from two different perspectives, as their soldier character and as individuals.

"I was referred to as Evans throughout and we adapted to the names so much that it was weird to go back to our normal names at the end of the trip."

Each member of the group carried an original 303 Lee Enfield rifle which was used by troops during WWII and weighed up to 7kgs each.

"We faced many difficulties and learned so many life lessons.

"Being put in a position of survival taught me so much, about how to be appreciative and to keep going even when it gets hard and not to give up.

"I learned that life isn't just about me, and that there are people who have much worse

problems than I do." A humble and softly spoken 17-year-old, Mehdi has seen his fair share of first-hand conflict without having to simulate the experience.

Mehdi and his family of 10 migrated to Australia two years ago after fleeing worn-torn Afghanistan.

"I thought about joining the army, but mum doesn't want me to. She says that our family have already had enough experience with war.

"She wants me to fight with a pen instead, to use my knowledge to better the world."

Since returning, Mehdi's next big dream is to create a Kokoda memorial in Pakenham, where people can bring things together that they might have from the war to put on display.

"I want to share the story of Kokoda with the youth and keep the memory alive.

"I don't want the soldiers' experiences and their sacrifices to be forgotten."

Mehdi would appreciate any suggestions from the local community about ways to get the Pakenham Kokoda Memorial off the ground.

They can be sent to news@pak-sc.com.au.