

One Of The Last Kokoda Diggers Opens Up About WW2

Reg Chard, 99, is a humble hero. In fact, call him a hero and you get short shrift.

"Don't," he told me in no uncertain terms. "Heroes are the ones who don't come home. Not me. I've had a good life ... they've had nothing."

Chard is one of the last Kokoda diggers.

This deeply honourable man feels a sense of survivor guilt.

"Because of what I've had and what they've missed ... they've had no life," he said.

This year marks 80 years since the Kokoda Campaign. To mark the anniversary, Chard has penned his memoirs, simply called *The Digger of Kokoda*.

Chard was an 18-year-old baker and pastry apprentice when he decided to fight for his country.

"Seventeenth of November, 1941," he told me.

At first the recruitment sergeant knocked him back because of his job in the bakery.

"Now I can't tell you what he did say to me, but all the blokes were laughing because they were all older than me," he remembered.

"Anyway, I thought this is no good."

So Chard became a storeman for a week.

The ship docked in Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea and on board with Chard was renowned war photographer Damien Parer.

"He was a great man," he told me. "Only one thing was wrong with him ... he was too brave."

Parer's images documented the Kokoda Campaign. He was to later die by a sniper's bullet.

Chard was also an amateur photographer and he managed to sneak his camera on board, even though the troops were told they couldn't have them.

"I wanted to take photos of all the men - that's what I really wanted it for," he said.

Chard has kept those photos; he struggles, though, to look at them.

"I cry ... all the time, so this is why I don't look at them too often," he said.

"They were all ages and they had all different sorts of religions, they had all different sorts of jobs ... but they were still ... a lot of them were young men, you know."

Eventually Chard and his mates were heading into the jungle that was the Kokoda Trail.

They made the last stand at Imita Ridge.

"At one stage there, when the Japanese pushed right back ... [the command] told us, 'If you're all killed here, at Imita Ridge, so be it'," he recalled.

"That's when we knew things were grim."

Luckily the Japanese retreated hoping to be joined by 20,000 reinforcements.

"If they had done that, this country was gone, or we were gone anyway, so this country would have been gone," he told me.

"They were better men than we were, well, I mean they'd been fighting since 1932, so I mean they had 10 years on us.

"So we had to learn, and learn the hard way."

Chard said he was never scared.

"I can't describe it. You're not scared ... it just seems to be part of your life," he said

Life was hell on earth - persistent rain, mud up to their knees, terrible terrain - the jungle so dense, the enemy could be just centimetres away.

Many Japanese could speak perfect English and would try to lure the Aussies into a trap.

"You might be out in the jungle somewhere and hear somebody saying, 'Oh mate, come and get me, I'm shot in the guts, I can't get up,'" he remembered.

"The only thing they couldn't say was Woolloomooloo.

"And you sing out, 'Did you live in Woolloomooloo?' ... 'No, I don't live in Wool...'

"They couldn't say Woolloomooloo, so that's it, you'd give 'em a burst wherever you thought they were."

Days turned to weeks; weeks turned to months.

"It was a terrible, terrible experience... you can't describe it," Chard said.

At night it would be unbearably cold.

"I was freezing cold and I was feeling around because in the jungle it's very dark," he remembered.

"I felt something and I thought, 'That feels warm', so I moved over alongside of it.

"As it got brighter in the morning, I looked.

"I was laying next to a dead body and it was full of maggots and they were all on me."

Chard remembered clearly the day he lost two mates.

They were standing on either side of him. One had just told Chard about his plans if they got out alive.

"He said, 'I'm going to marry Isabel' - that's his girlfriend - 'I want you to be my best man' and I said, 'That would be lovely,'" Chard told me.

"He took one step forward and 'Bang' and he got a bullet ... and he was dead before he even started to fall over."

His other mate was also hit in the head.

Chard figured a tree had obscured him from the enemy.

"So I did what they don't expect you to do – they expect you to run away. I ran towards them and threw them out of gear and I'm still here today," he said.

He has no doubt that if the Kokoda Trail fell to the Japanese, Australia was next.

"Australia was gone," he said.

Chard lost too many friends to count; he also took lives.

"You don't think about it ... it's either him or me," he said.

I asked him if there is one memory that keeps him awake at night.

"It was the worst thing I ever saw," he confided.

It was towards the end of the campaign when Chard and 12 of his mates came across a camp where Japanese officers had taken a number of women prisoner, abused them and executed them.

"You have no idea ... you wouldn't think that another human being would do that to a human being ... the things that they did," he said.

The Aussies mounted an attack and killed the Japanese troops.

"We killed them all," he said.

"What we found was 25 white ladies and they'd had them for months evidently."

The women had been mutilated and beheaded.

"Won't tell you the other things they did because it was just inhumane," he said.

"That's what haunts me at night time."

The 13 Aussies who bore witness to that terrible day, made a pact to forever keep the identities of the women secret so their families would never know the horrific truth.

"I'm the last one left so nobody will ever know ... but you know ... I know who they were," Chard said.

The Kokoda Campaign saw Chard contract malaria and scrub typhus, which killed many of his mates.

"When you get scrub typhus, you're unconscious for 15 days and either you wake up, or you don't, you just don't," he said.

In fact he had no idea when the war ended.

"I collapsed on the 21st of January, 1943, and the Japanese surrendered on the 22nd," Chard said.

He's convinced he owes his life to the local Papua New Guineans - "the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels".

"Real angels, yes. And they would never leave you. If the Japanese slaughtered them, so be it, but they wouldn't leave you," he said.

Eleven years ago, cancer claimed the life of his childhood sweetheart, Betty.

But while she was being treated at Concord Hospital, Chard went across the Kokoda Track Memorial Walkway. It saved his life.

Today he's the last Kokoda Digger, educating all about the horrors of that awful time.

Many of the men featured in what are iconic Kokoda photos have now been etched in stone at the memorial. Most are Chard's long lost mates.

Make no mistake, Chard is one proud Australian.

While the tears are always close, the memories are closer.

"Even to this day, well, I'm going like it now to start with," Chard told me as he wiped away a tear.

"This is what happens all the time."

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