



Transcript

Arts, Literature and Music

A Good Read

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The Bone Man of Kokoda by Charles Happell

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Charles Happell was born in Geelong in 1962. He has been a journalist for 23 years, covering Federal politics then returning to sports writing. Moving overseas he worked London and Milan. Returning in 1993 to Australia to join the staff of *The Age*, he now lives in Melbourne. It was in April 2006 while walking the Kokoda Track that his guide told him of Kokichi Nishimura a WWII Japanese soldier who had come back to Papua New Guinea to look for the remains of his comrades. Intrigued, Happell decided to do some research on Nishimura when he returned to Melbourne.

The name Kokoda for many Australians, brings to mind images of WWII Australian soldiers trekking through a dense and muddy jungle aided by Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels. The other side of the Kokoda image is Japanese. One most Australians know nothing about. I selected this book because of that very reason. It not only follows Kokichi Nishimura's life and war experiences but how a promise can be life altering.

The book begins with Nishimura doing his "duty" by delivered newspapers to help his family after his father dies when he was nine. Throughout the book, Nishimura exhibits a contradiction of traditional values and the attributes of a rebel. The traditional values are due to the time and the structure of the Japanese society he was born into. As an engineering genius the attitude of "I can do it and no one can tell me I can't" fostered his rebel element. So while delivering newspapers he was also learning how to drive the school bus.

Due to hard work and skill by the time he was 17 he was the "go to man" if you had an engineering problem. But by age 21 he was a member of The Imperial Japanese Army. The book then follows his life as a soldier, his experiences and the friends he made during that time. As a recruit he was given "The Imperial Rescript" which sets out the qualities of a Japanese soldier. Two key points of the rescript are "The soldier should consider loyalty their essential duty and bear in mind that duty is weightier than a mountain while death is lighter than a feather" and "Being faithful and righteous implies keeping one's word and fulfilling one's duty" these would be the driving forces throughout his life.

During his early military experiences Nishimura forged friendships just as any soldier would. "Mateship" is an important concept to Australians but is not unique to Australia. Outside of the village of Efogi on the Kokoda Track Nishimura's platoon fought with Australian soldiers in a

ferocious battle known as the Battle of Brigade Hill or as the Japanese called it the Battle of Ippongi (one tree). It was during this battle that Nishimura lost his whole platoon, forty one men died during the battle, or of wounds received. Only Nishimura survived. The effects on him can be seen throughout the book.

When the Japanese evacuated Papua New Guinea in January 1943, their sick and wounded were left behind with out explanation. I felt his disbelief and anger that these men had been left to die. Nishimura's last words to them were "If you die here, we will collect your bones and bring them back to your families in Japan." This was the promise he later tried to fulfil.

Back in Japan after the war, Nishimura married had four children and started an engineering business. His wife and children knew from the beginning the he would be going back to PNG to collect the bones of his comrades. In 1979 at the age of sixty and after many years of planning he told his family he was finally going to PNG. This decision split the family. Only his daughter supported him.

Nishimura's time in PNG covered 26 years from 1979-2005. During this time he built roads, schools, training facilities and bought boats for fishing and trade for the local communities. Some of these benefited him as well. He built a memorial to all those who died at Kokoda. Like Nishimura I was incensed with the PNG government who considered that they had the right of ownership regarding the bones of Japanese soldiers.

Added to this was my growing disbelief that the Japanese government was doing so little if anything to bring its soldiers home. Good, bad, right or wrong I agree with Nishimura that the government should not continue to abandon them. Nishimura suggests that two of the main reasons are the lucrative tuna fishing off the PNG coast as well as not jeopardising a favourable vote at the International Whaling Commission. This made me think of the wider political agendas involved but also made me angry.

In those twenty six years, Nishimura tried to fulfil his traditionally based promise but used any means possible. Many of the things he did went against tradition such as disobeying laws. His maverick side ignored the things which stopped him fulfilling his promise. A truly traditional man would have obeyed his government, its laws and the prevailing views of his society.

I can't agree with some of his beliefs, such as bushido, death before capture. My background makes it difficult for me to understand his views on how a warrior should act. Regardless of this, I was left agreeing with Nishimura that a government should do its duty no matter what the political climate.

While reading the book I was impressed by how little Nishimura wanted for himself, but how he used every skill he had to help others. His determination and will to complete his promise was inspiring and uplifting. If you want to know a strong forceful person who's life is punctuated by loyalty, honour and duty, may I suggest you meet *The Bone Man of Kokoda*.