

Michael Davis | *February 19, 2008*

A FULL skeleton of a Japanese soldier has been found buried on the Kokoda Track, clutching his dog tag, diary and helmet to his chest.

It is believed to be the first time in 30 years that a full skeleton has been unearthed on the track in Papua New Guinea.

Tour leaders - most of them descendants of the Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels who helped Australian troops during World War II - were last week directed to an area on the south side of Mount Bellamy near Templetons Crossing by local landowners, who said they had discovered human skeletal bones.

"At first we found a boot with toe bones still inside," said Wayne Wetherall, founder of the Kokoda Spirit tour group. "Then we found a couple of leg bones and more boots. There were six boots all together." They then unearthed a full skeleton buried under about 50cm of soil.

"It was quite emotional. You are used to seeing all the weapon pits and grenades as you move along the track," said Mr Wetherall. "But once you find a warrior, it puts a different perspective on the fierceness of the battle."

He said some time had been taken to bury the unknown Japanese soldier. "He had been placed on his side, his dog tag, diary and helmet beside his chest."

The skeleton has been covered over again until a full investigation can be carried out by the Japanese Government. It is thought at least three soldiers are buried at the site because six boots were found.

The Kokoda Track is a 96km track where Australian troops repelled the Japanese against the odds and in horrendous conditions, defying the enemy access to Australia.

The recent discovery does not help the cause of proponents of a copper mining project that will damage about 600m of the track. The Koiari landowners are protesting to the PNG Government over its reluctance to renew the mining exploration licence. Locals will reap millions of dollars from the copper mine. The Rudd Government is against the mine and is pushing for the Kokoda Track to be added to the World Heritage list.

The discovery of the skeleton on February 10 was helped by tropical cyclone Guba causing havoc in PNG's northern province, bringing torrential rains. At first, the group thought the remains were those of an Australian soldier and contacted the Australian embassy in PNG, before realising the skeleton was Japanese.

It could take the Japanese bureaucracy up to 12 months to decide what to do with the skeleton, Australian officials told Mr Wetherall.