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## **Media Release For Immediate Circulation**



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### **Bravery in the bush a 70 year old legend**

Bernard O'Reilly never liked to be called a hero, but seventy years after his gruelling rescue of the two survivors of the Stinson air crash, the amazing survival and rescue story is well and truly the stuff of epic legend.

As O'Reilly's prepares to mark the anniversary, a growing number of people are being drawn to relive the story of the 1937 crash and to retrace the brave steps Bernard took, both as a difficult physical and mental challenge and a way to honour the heroism.

Walks 'off the beaten track' through the rugged terrain to where the Stinson crashed are growing in popularity, as a tribute trek in the spirit of that other great memorial walk along the Kokoda Track.

O'Reilly's Activities Manager Tim O'Reilly, a veteran of more than 30 'Stinson Walks', says a sense of history provided plenty of inspiration for walkers.

"People look back at what happened in the aftermath of the Stinson Crash and are really moved by the strength and endurance of the human spirit," Mr O'Reilly said.

The Stinson story is one of both tragedy and hope and in the mind of Bernard O'Reilly, one of divine intervention. Five people died, four in the crash itself, with the fifth man Jim Westray perishing after going for help.

Locals in the Kerry Valley below the crash scene reported seeing the Sydney bound Stinson aircraft disappear into thick cloud, but authorities concentrated their search in the Hawkesbury River area north of Sydney instead, believing other reports that the doomed plane had been sighted there.

It was only eight days later, when Bernard heard the accounts of his brother and others in the valley, that he decided to search the wilds of Lamington National Park, convinced the plane had been caught in a downdraft and crashed into one of the steep mountain escarpments, meeting its fate in the isolated bush.

The full walk to the Stinson wreck site is a 12 hour test of endurance that requires good physical fitness and training, giving walkers a taste of the incredible fortitude Bernard must have had to trek in alone to find the survivors, scramble out of the rugged bush to raise the alarm, return with a rescue party and then finally bring the injured men out.

So arduous was the rescue mission, that Bernard lost 16kg over four days of endurance as he first climbed a mountain to spot a burnt patch of bush that marked the crash scene, then hacked his way through untraversed bushland to beyond an area known as 'The Lost World' in his desperate search.

Hearing a faint cooee call for help, he found courageous survivors Joe Binstead and John Proud barely alive, the latter suffering a broken leg.

Fearing they might not last long enough to be saved, Bernard literally raced down steep hillsides through dense rainforest to follow Christmas Creek to raise the alarm, finding Westray dead, and then running on in darkness to the nearest farm.

His mad scramble from the crash scene took just 2.5 hours, a distance that normally takes walkers four hours to traverse.

With no time to rest, Bernard led a rescue party back to the crash scene and as men from all over the area rallied to join the rescue efforts, helped hack a safe trail for the stretchers across the ridgetops to bring the injured survivors out.

Bernard's daughter Rhelma Kenny recalls the accolades her father received in the wake of the amazing rescue, but also her father's reluctance to wear the hero tag.

"He didn't think he was a hero, so we didn't," Mrs Kenny said. "He said he was just doing what he was meant to do."

"To him the whole thing was a nightmare, because he was tormented that he had come too late and that the survivors would be dead when he came back with help to get them out."

While Bernard was at the centre of the heroics, the rescue is a tribute to the whole community and to the enduring value of local knowledge, in an era before professional search and rescue operations.

An injured World War I veteran who lived the life of a hermit in a remote cave played a valuable role in the mission, scouting ahead to determine the best path to get the men out.

"The whole story is one that captivates – the fact that authorities initially ignored the local sightings, the odds of finding the crash scene in such an isolated area and the miracle that the survivors lasted long enough to be found," Mrs Kenny said.

She will present a slide-show of the story after a commemorative dinner on February 9<sup>th</sup>, with a walk from Christmas Creek to the wreck site via Westray's grave the following day giving participants a taste of the difficulty Bernard and the rescuers faced. The 7 - 8 hour walk requires a moderate level of fitness.

Full 12 hour Stinson Walks are held during 'Off the Beaten Track' in August, when walking conditions are much more comfortable than in the heat of February. The walk is also offered by private group bookings throughout the year.

"We get groups of friends motivated by the heroics and we've had a Personal Training group take on the walk as their ultimate training challenge," Mr O'Reilly said.

"Whatever the reason for walking, when we are on our way out most people are just concerned with getting out of the bush or simply making it to the next rest stop, but when they finish everyone certainly reflects on how remarkable the story is."

Numbers are limited to join in the special anniversary walk, for in-house guests joining in the commemorations.

For further information or to make a booking, contact O'Reilly's Reservations on 1800 688 722.

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