GULF TO GULF

To Nicola

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The Long Walk

As told to Cyril Ayris

Pictures Jeff Johnson

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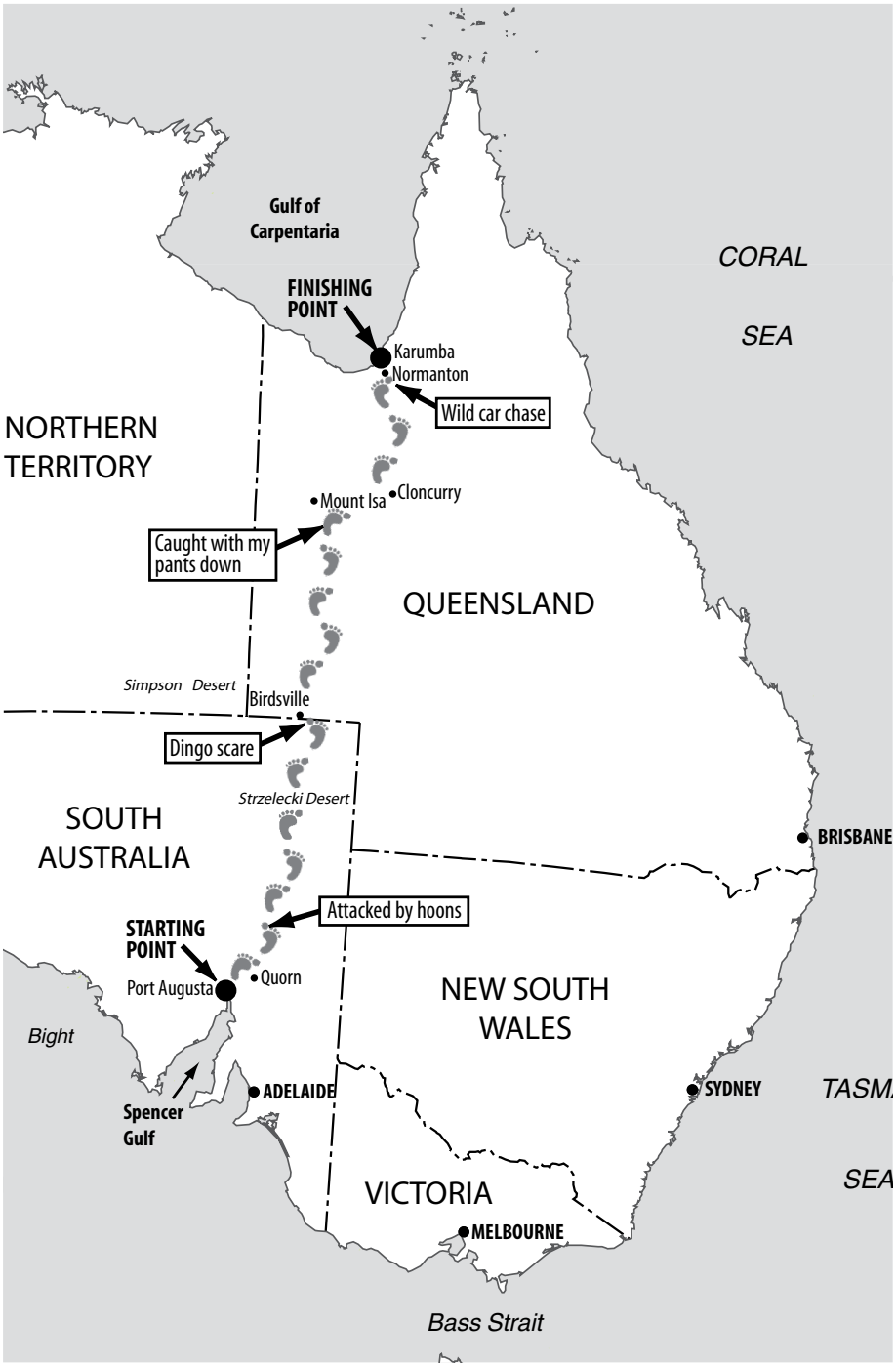
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CHAPTER 1

An idea is born

I remember with great clarity the warm lazy day when the idea came to me. It was late May 2006. I was in my caravan annex slumped in a battered but comfortable easy chair and drinking black coffee. My transistor radio was tuned to the ABC but my mind was concentrated more on the half-cleared paddock falling away in front of me to the dry creek bed. There was birdsong in the air and when the breeze stirred the eucalypts there was a rattle of sun-tough leaves. There were sixty or more cows out there somewhere. Once I would have been on edge in case they'd strayed but there was no chance of that now – I'd finished the fence.

I am, for want of a better description, caretaker of Allan Creek Pastoral Company, a 240-hectare property carved from bush country out the back of Beaudesert, eighty kilometres inland from Brisbane. The owner is my mate Russell Organ who also owns a bobcat hire business on the southern Gold Coast. Russell doesn't live on the property; he brings his partner and their kids here two or three times a month but they are the only times I see him.

I have become something of a hermit. Perhaps not in the true sense of the word, but if some bloke were to stumble into my camp and I was foolish enough to acquaint him with my lifestyle, that's how he would describe me.

And who could blame him? I'm happy by myself, I have no need for social intercourse – indeed I'm uncomfortable in the company of people who have too much to say about too little. The truth is I'd rather live in a caravan looking after sixty cows out the back of Allan Creek than be stuck with a group of people whose main topic of conversation is the previous night's television.

It's not that I'm anti-social, I like people dropping in, I enjoy a chinwag, in fact I pride myself on being able to hold my own in discussions on world affairs, most sports and even gardening, although I confess to being more at ease when the talk is on technical matters such as communications, or power generation, or navigation. I can fix, build and generally extend the life of just about any piece of machinery, including washing machines, televisions, videos, cars – I once sorted out a malfunctioning ATM circuit board in Birdsville.

These qualifications, combined with my disinterest in monetary reward, had made me eminently suited to running Russell's Allan Creek.

Russell, I should explain, is the original rough diamond. He's pretty smart, too – he doesn't just own Allan Creek, he also owns a small but busy earthworks business, not to mention another property at Tallebudgera.

I had been living on his Tallebudgera property helping to run the place when he suggested one day that we drive out to Allan Creek.

'I'd like you to see it,' he'd said.

Thinking back on it, I reckon he was setting me up: he wanted somebody to manage the property and he knew that once I'd clapped eyes on it, I'd put my hand up for the job.

He was dead right. I took one look at the steep timbered valleys, and breathed in the sweet mountain air, and said, 'By jeez, I like this. How about I stay here and run this place? That'd leave you more time to concentrate on your bobcats.'

Russell appeared to give the idea weighty consideration before admitting that it might have merit.

It had turned out a sound arrangement all around, certainly so far as I was concerned. Mind you, I've made a lot of improvements: a small wind turbine now whirls happily, generating enough power for a fluorescent light; I've built a wire fence around my caravan and vegetable garden to keep out the cattle; and my homemade barbecue cooks steak to perfection. Hell, I'm even baking my own bread! And in a far corner of the wire enclosure, within spitting distance of my caravan, stands my workbench, lovingly constructed from a split log of great strength. Oh, and there's the bath, a cast iron tub supported at both ends with bricks, so that there is room underneath for hot coals from the fire. I am as happy as a bunny in a lettuce patch.

My typical day starts at first light maybe an hour before sunrise when the first bird calls are as clear as spring water. I make coffee using water from a tank which I've patched up and fitted with an automatic pressure-sensitive pump to the caravan. Then I strike out from my bush home with my 'day pack' – water, gloves, tomahawk, and fencing pliers – and spend the day fixing broken fences,

installing and repairing bore pumps, or supervising the cattle. If there is nothing else to do I fire up one of the four-wheel-drives and tow boulders to creek beds and construct causeways. The light is usually fading long before I pack my tools and start for home. It's hard physical work but I'm in heaven.

It's rugged country; an aerial photograph gives it the appearance of a crumpled blanket. The hills are three hundred metres high – it takes me a full day just to walk the boundary fence, and that's after making an early start.

When Russell drops in every couple of weeks, he invariably leaves some supplies, and maybe $50 spending money.

Sometimes he and his family and friends stay for a 'farm weekend' in the 'permanent caravans' a couple of hundred metres away. They bring tents, generators and eskies full of food and drink, and spend the weekend horse riding or hooning around the property in the farm vehicles. We pass the evenings yarning around their campfire, but they always trek over to my place to inspect my latest home-made hot water system, or the scooter which has been turned into a generator, or my worm farm …

Life, I tell myself, could hardly be better.

That at least was what I was thinking on that May morning when I sat sipping black coffee and listening to the ABC.

As I said, I'm interested in navigation and the Australian bush, so when a woman – she said she was a grandmother – came on air to talk about how she and a group of friends had cycled from Port Augusta on Spencer Gulf to Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria, I pricked my ears. In the course of the interview she said that they had stayed mostly in caravan parks and that their twenty-strong group had back-up vehicles.

Gulf to gulf? A grandmother? Back-up vehicles?

I'm not sure how long I remained in my easy chair but I know my thoughts were racing. This was precisely the sort of feat that appealed to me. Not that I would be interested in cycling. Walking was my great love.

Six months earlier I had walked six hundred kilometres from the New South Wales-Queensland border to Gladstone. There had been no real purpose behind it – I just thought it a good idea. I'd done it in stages, I'd wanted to find out how far I could walk in one day. It was about thirty kilometres from memory.

Yes, I could do better than *cycle* across Australia. If a grandmother could ride a bicycle across, why couldn't I walk it? Certainly I was sixty-five but I was as fit as a mallee bull – and when it comes to hard yakka I pride myself on being able to keep up with blokes half my age. Age, I assure myself, is irrelevant.

The challenge was in planning, navigation and communication – and I was confident in all three areas.

The communications side of it was something I could get my teeth into because I understood its complexities. I had been a radio buff all my life, I'd built my first crystal radio sets and amplifiers when I was a teenager, I'd served an apprenticeship with Amalgamated Wireless Australasia (AWA), I was a qualified production engineer and I had helped set up Military Electronics Division (MED) in Sydney.

As far as the walk was concerned I knew that it was just a matter of taking the right equipment. Planning? … well, I reckoned I could organise something like this better than most.

But did I really want to do it?

I sat for a long time, absorbing the peace and tranquility of my refuge, where birds sang and streams sometimes bubbled, and cows grew fat off the land.

Refuge. Did I call it a refuge? That sounds as though I was hiding from something, but I wasn't. I'd been twice married and had fathered seven children, but there had been no blazing rows or acrimony in either of the break-ups. Rather, we had drifted apart and I had gone my own way, leaving the equity in both houses to my wives. Each time I had simply left home with an overnight bag and started anew.

Money has never been important to me in the sense of what it can buy. I would rather buy a cheap secondhand generator which I can fix up myself, than a shiny new model which is three times as expensive.

I look at it this way: if you are good at fixing things, you have little need for money. And if you don't need money, you have no incentive to take on a structured job. Thus, you have plenty of that valuable yet most tenuous of commodities – time. And if time is so valuable why the devil would you want to waste it grinding through a nine-to-five day, accumulating something you don't need, namely money? Anyway, that's my philosophy.

*

Looking back, I reckon that when I finally pulled myself out of my easy chair, I had already half made up my mind about that walk. I knew I wouldn't be able to start until the following April – no point trying to walk through the centre of Australia in the middle of summer – so I had all the time in the world for visiting camping, radio and map shops, evaluating what was on offer, assessing weight, durability and cost. There was no pressure and I liked that.

It has been said that half the pleasure of travel is in the planning, and it may well be true, because I began looking forward to my trips into town with uncustomary excitement.

CHAPTER 2

Some serious research

I spent countless hours haunting Gold Coast camping shops; hours and hours. I tested backpacks for weight and comfort. I worked out how much they held, whether the pockets were waterproof and in the right places, how sturdy they were, whether the material was suited to the conditions I would encounter. I tried on socks and boots, and I tested shirts between finger and thumb. I discussed dehydrated food, cooking utensils, water purifiers, sleeping bags, billycans, compasses and ground mats. Should I take sunscreen and if so, what brand? What about flies? – should I be a wuss and carry repellant or could I put up with them?

I left some bemused shop staff in my wake yet none complained. I think they respected the depth of my research, it was as though they were playing a vital part in an ambitious expedition, the success or failure of which depended on the quality of their advice. They became, in a way, part of my back-up team and as such, took pride in pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of one brand of gear over another. I loved every minute of it. Go Camping at Nerang was one of my favourite shops. The manager Toby, also an adventurer, offered sound advice on everything from sleeping bag ratings to gas burners. He demonstrated, for instance, how a gas single-burner cooker could flare dangerously when overturned. A petrol cooker was safer, he said. I thought I was well versed in such matters but this was a revelation to me.

My days on Russell's cattle property now seemed to pass more quickly. I was still fixing fences, digging holes, filling holes and mending pumps but my long hours of solitude were now devoted to planning my walk.

I imagined everything that could go wrong then worked out how I would recover. What if I was bitten by a snake? How about a fall? A broken leg? What if my communications failed? Or I ran out of water? Became lost? Or the heavens opened and the interior flooded? What if somebody stole my gear while I was asleep? Attacked by wild pigs? The conceivable problems were endless. Careful planning was the answer. Careful planning would reduce the possibility of disaster to an acceptable level.

In July 2006 I made my decision: I would walk 2500 kilometres through the middle of Australia from Spencer Gulf to the Gulf of Carpentaria, following minor roads and tracks, with no support vehicle and carrying everything on my back. Included in 'everything' would be food, eight litres of water (weighing eight kilograms), clothing, a small tent, thermal sleeping bag, two-way amateur radio equipment and antenna, a battery big enough to supply reliable communications and a solar-charging panel which would hang from my pack. The all-up weight would be twenty-eight kilograms. I considered taking a satellite phone but ruled it out because of the $2500 cost. I also thought about carrying an EPIRB but I figured that as I had a cell phone and radio, and would be following roads, it was unnecessary.

I gave Russell six months' notice.

CHAPTER 3

Walking for a good cause

I decided I would start my journey by dipping a foot in Spencer Gulf at Port Augusta. I would then strike north along the western edge of the Flinders Ranges and turn right to Hawker. From there I would head for Wilpena, Blinman, Wirrealpa, Arkaroola and the Strzelecki Track which would take me to Moomba and on to Innamincka, Birdsville, Bedourie, Boulia, Mt Isa, Cloncurry and Normanton. My finishing point would be Karumba where I would dip a foot in the Gulf of Carpentaria. There would be many other stops but they were the main identifiable towns or settlements where I would be able to take a breather, collect mail and replace expended body mass with a few square meals. My intention was to re-supply (other than water) only from towns, caravan parks and roadhouses. I did not want to rely on stations for food because I knew they carried just enough for their own staff. If a meal were offered, however, I would certainly accept.

Maps were a problem. The main roads were shown on general maps but I would be using little-used tracks and gravel roads that would appear only on maps of 1:250,000 scale. I needed to know where there were station tracks in case I had to divert to a homestead for water. I needed maps that showed fence lines, water holes, creeks, bores – everything and anything that would help me survive in a hostile land. The problem was that though such maps were readily available, they cost $9 each. And as each covered only two days' walking, I would be carrying dozens at a time – too heavy, too expensive.

The problem was solved by Phil Myers at Gold Coast Charts and Maps. Phil is a retired airline pilot who loves maps and travelling rough. After I explained

what I was doing he said he had a set of four CDs with maps of my route at the scale I needed. They were undoubtedly what I wanted but my face must have signalled my concern over the $99 price tag because, after the briefest of pauses, he pulled out a pocket calculator, punched in some figures and said, 'You can have them for $69.' I thanked him profusely and handed him the cash.

They were perfect. I would be able to print out single sheet maps, each covering a day's walk of about twenty kilometres. At the end of the day I would use them to light a fire or clean my billy. I would start with thirty or forty covering the route to Birdsville, and the rest would be forwarded to me there. I left Gold Coast Charts and Maps mightily pleased.

My brother Bill was involved in all of these arrangements, in fact he would be my main support from start to finish. Bill and I have always been close; he was one of the first people in whom I had confided my plans. He had expressed no surprise, he knew me better than that. 'Sounds like a great idea,' he had said.

We were now communicating daily, making arrangements and attending to a thousand and one details. It was decided, for instance that once the walk started we would maintain morning and evening radio position schedules. He would be responsible for forwarding mail and possibly supplies, and he would call up a rescue should anything go wrong. I could not have had a more capable or reliable backstop.

By the end of January 2007 I had bought most of my equipment.

After much deliberation I had opted for a Karrimoor backpack with a waterproof cover. The pack was adjustable and had a weight capacity of about thirty kilograms. I had found on my walks along the Queensland coast that thirty kilograms was the absolute maximum I could carry – the problem was not so much in the carrying as in being able to hoist it on to my back.

The Vaude (Hogan Ultralight) two-man tent was made of light siliconised nylon; the pegs were pressed aluminium. With the orange stuff-sack, it weighed in at 1.44 kilograms. I chose a two-man tent because I would be emptying my backpack each night and I wanted everything stored under cover. I also needed to be able to sit up at night when eating, reading or checking my maps. And if there was heavy rain I might have to stay under cover all day. The tent had inner and outer skins, the outer one as protection against the sun and rain. (I would come to appreciate this because it was invariably drenched by morning dew). My Roman sleeping bag had a zero temperature rating and was washable.

I had a cheap ground sheet with eyelets which I could spread under the tent for protection against sharp sticks and stones, or hang from a tree to provide shade in the more arid regions.

My radio and communications equipment weighed 1.5 kilograms and

cost about $1200. Add eight litres of water and you start to appreciate the need for careful evaluation of every item to be carried. (I resisted the temptation to pluck alternate bristles from my toothbrush, though I did cut the handle in half).

I would take two pairs of shorts, one for walking, the other a lighter pair to preserve my decency while doing my washing in caravan parks. Footwear was obviously important and I chose Brooks Walking Boots, size 13 EEEE, and a pair of thongs. I had wanted to buy the same brand of boots I had worn on a previous six hundred-kilometre walk but when they proved to be unavailable I was persuaded by the manager of Pauley's boot shop in Dee Why to try the Brooks shoe. I found them comfortable and, with some misgivings, I put them on my credit card. I say misgivings because I rarely wore shoes, preferring thongs or bare feet, so the shock of forking out the $178 asking price bordered on excruciating.

The rest of my wardrobe comprised one pair of woollen knitted gloves, a floppy hat (secondhand), seven pairs of jocks and socks, and a plastic coat and leggings. My toiletries included baby powder, Vaseline, toothpaste, wilderness soap, toilet paper, a towel, sunscreen, and cholesterol and thyroxin pills.

For communication, photography, recording and general necessities I would carry a transceiver, a microphone, twenty metres of light antenna wire, fifty metres of light Venetian cord, a camera, transistor radio, voice recorder, GPS receiver and batteries, UHF citizens' band radio, a mobile phone, battery packs, multi-meter, mini jumper leads, some small tools, a first aid kit and a solar panel. You may think I was going a bit over the top with all this electronic stuff but there was not one item on the list that I considered superfluous. I knew I would be crossing country where help would often be unavailable and that I had to be as self-sufficient and self-supporting as possible.

The solar panel had been a challenge. It had to be reliable – it would be charging my batteries, and with no batteries my communications equipment would be useless. It also had to be light and flexible.

I found one on the internet but I wanted the 5 watt model which was as scarce as hens' teeth. I launched an extensive search eventually tracking down two, one in Britain, the other in Dapto, near Wollongong, a place better known for its greyhounds than for solar panels. I telephoned the owner who assured me that he had the model I was looking for, and invited me over to inspect it.

I caught a train to Dapto where, by chance, I walked straight to the street my man had nominated. At least, I thought it was the street – it was certainly the same name. 'Everything is falling into place,' I told myself. But he had told me he was at number two – and number two was a bank. Maybe I had the

wrong number. I walked up and down both sides of the street without finding any sign of a shop. In frustration, I rang him.

'You've got the name of the street right,' he said, 'but I'm at the other end, the rural end. I'm at the other end of town. I'm at Lot 2. Get a taxi.'

When I told my taxi driver this he was as puzzled as me. 'There's nothing out there, mate,' he said. 'It's all *rural*.'

It proved to be a good description. The road narrowed, the scenery opened up, and signs of habitation were becoming less obvious by the minute. As for shops …

'What is it you're after?' asked my driver. After I'd described what I was looking for he said, 'Oh him! I reckon I might know him. Funny sort of a bloke.'

My heart sank.

The establishment turned out to be a shed, not a shop as I'd expected. However, the owner came out, introduced himself and invited me inside. I stared in amazement – the walls were lined with all manner of solar panels.

The portable 5 watt model was exactly what I was looking for. The weight was acceptable, it was flexible, it appeared robust and the price of $148 was affordable. I noticed that the box it came in was slightly damaged but I put that down to it having been opened a few times. (The significance of that damage would strike me later when I was a week or so into the walk).

I bought the solar panel and carried it back to the waiting taxi. I was ready.

*

Shortly before I was due to start the walk my plan took a new and unexpected turn. It started with a phone call from my brother Bill who asked if I would be interested in meeting Janne Bidenko, President of the DeafBlind Association, in Sydney. I said I would be delighted to meet her – and I must digress here to explain why.

Bill and his wife Lyn had a lovely daughter, Nicola, who was born with a genetic disorder which had not become apparent until she was a toddler and having difficulty walking. She could not stand unaided and she was blind and deaf. This gorgeous little girl could distinguish light from dark and she knew if somebody crossed the room, but she was unable to recognise a face. She could hear a sharp tap on a table, but as she was unable to identify your voice unless she knew you well, or you spoke directly into her ear, we communicated by deaf-blind finger spelling. Nicola never mastered walking. If she wanted to cross the room to a table somebody had to stand behind her taking her weight, and 'walk' her there. Nicola needed twenty-four hour care.

The wonderful thing was that Nicola had a brilliant mind. She could

beat us all at Scrabble, she had travelled overseas, she had even learnt music. Unable to use her fingers, she had learnt to purse her lips to make contact with an electronic keyboard – and she was not content with playing doh-ray-me primary school stuff, she played serious music.

I was very close to her; I was her favourite uncle and she was my favourite niece. I knew I shouldn't have favourites but we had a rapport that was probably born out of her disabilities – that and the fact that I was a free spirit, and able to spend time with her. I certainly did that, we would spend hours together. She knew my voice and she loved listening to me talk. I would say, 'Can you see the horizon?' Of course, that would mean nothing to her until I said, 'Can you see the trees? Can you see the fence? Can you see the edge of the verandah?' It gave her a perspective of the word 'horizon'.

I would say, 'There's a 'roo out there,' and I'd describe what it looked like and how it moved.

Sometimes I talked to her about the wind in the trees. She was conscious of the wind but only in the way it felt against her cheeks. I explained how it moved the leaves on the trees and how, as it grew stronger, it moved the twigs, then the small branches, then the big branches and sometimes even the trunk. Between us we created a sort of Beaufort scale by which Nicola could imagine the effect of the wind on a tree.

Then Nicola died. She was thirty-seven and she had caught a cold which developed into pneumonia. She was admitted to hospital where she was given every possible care, but she passed away a few days later. The family was shattered, deeply shattered.

The result of all this was that the family had been involved for many years with the DeafBlind Association and Janne Bidenko – which was why I now had no hesitation in agreeing to meet her, particularly when Bill confided that he had discussed the possibility of using my walk as a fund and awareness-raising venture for the association.

That, I thought, was a brilliant idea. It would be a wonderful cause for an organisation I deeply admired and it would lend purpose to my walk.

I arrived at Janne's Sydney home with my new solar panel and most of my gear for a 'show-and-tell' session. We agreed that the association would organise publicity by alerting newspapers, television and radio stations in towns along my route, and that DBA's website would be used to receive donations. The association would also give me flags to carry on my pack and a T-shirt bearing its logo. I would not collect cash – I thought it unwise to broadcast that I was carrying money, though I was happy to rattle a tin in towns where the proceeds could be banked. We had no idea how much we would collect, though I hoped

there would be enough for a new mini bus for the association's NSW branch.

*

I arrived in Adelaide at the end of March 2007 and was met by the association's Emma Gordon who had telephoned the Adelaide Advertiser in the hope of generating some publicity. They were happy to oblige providing we sent them a photograph and agreed to a telephone interview. (The picture story appeared in the newspaper a week or so after I left on the walk).

After spending the night with Emma and her family I caught a bus to Port Augusta's Shoreline Caravan Park which is right on Spencer Gulf. I had decided to stay there two nights, timing my departure for 5 April. This allowed me to use my tent and try out my radio with a call to Bill, using the long line antenna. I also wanted to call my mate Roger Stierli in Ipswich who would be my key radio contact throughout the walk. Roger had thirty years' experience as a ham operator and he had very good equipment. I had worked with him for several years designing and building marine instruments.

After the caravan park manager gave me permission to set up my radio antenna I tried to contact Bill (VK2FWGJ) and Roger (VK4BNQ) at the agreed schedule time. The calls failed because of inadequate earthing. It didn't matter, my cell phone would be useable for a few days until I fixed the antenna. Using the cell phone I officially reported my position to Bill, as read from my GPS. (As I intended following this formality twice a day I thought it best to start off on the right foot).

I confess that I was pretty green regarding the ins and outs of amateur radio procedures. I had passed the exam for my licence five years earlier but as I had never owned a radio or even used anybody else's, I had allowed the licence to lapse after twelve months. So I knew I had some brushing up to do on the phonetic alphabet, radio etiquette and 'shorthand' language. But I was drawn to it like a magnet and couldn't resist moving round the dial listening to conversations between hams with such call signs as: VK5HOG, VK5AWD and VK5ADD (5 was South Australia). I also picked up conversations between VK5ADL, VK5AGP, VK5ZK (Barry), VK5BC (Brian) and VK3LY (Vic). I was itching to join in and give my location – maybe even describe my rig – but I lacked the confidence.

On 4 April I walked into town for some grocery shopping and a few bits and pieces from a Dick Smith's for my radio and electrical gear. I also needed five months' supply of tablets for my mild cholesterol and thyroid problems. Unfortunately my Medibank card had lapsed.

'There's an office just around the corner,' said the chemist. 'They'll give you a new one.'

I think the Medicare man wanted to help but he was having difficulty getting his mind around the fact that the person he was talking to had no home to call his own.

'But surely you have an address somewhere,' he said, with just a hint of admonishment. 'We must have an address.'

'Well, I er … I was living on a property near Tallebudgera.'

'Ah (brightening), Tallebudgera. You live …'

'No, I don't live there any more.'

'Oh.'

'Then there's my wives' houses.'

(A widening of the eyes): 'Your wives' … '

"Yeah but I gave them those places. They'd be no good.'

(Slowly): 'I see …'

'And there's a property I was helping look after not far from Beaudesert.'

He took up his biro.

'Hardly an address though. Don't know when I'd be going back there.'

'Well, where are you going?'

'Middle of Australia really. I'm walking to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Leaving tomorrow.'

He eventually accepted a friend's address – it was on my driving licence (Southport on the Gold Coast). I didn't tell him I had never seen the place. Actually the friend wasn't there either – he was living on a houseboat on the Coomera River. I had once lived next to him on a sixteen-metre ferro-cement hull. It was a complication which instinct told me would not have gone down well with my Medicare man. I got a receipt and a promise that a new card would be mailed to my friend's address.

I also visited the local National Parks office to let them know that I would be walking through their remote areas. I was concerned that I needed permission and that I would be expected to report my position once in a while on my radio. They showed no interest – plenty of blank stares but no interest. When I inquired whether I should notify any government department they hastily suggested the Department of Primary Industry. I duly called in there but they showed similar disinterest in my project. However, they were able to supply some useful information on several properties between Arkaroola and Innamincka.

Back at the caravan park I set up my radio again and at 5pm I talked to Roger. Reception was poor and after ten minutes my battery pack ran out of steam. I assumed that I had almost drained it when playing with the radio during the day. Also, the pack had not had much time recharging on the solar panel. That was what I told myself but I was uneasy – justifiably, as it would turn out.

CHAPTER 4

My first step

5 April, day 1

(Port Augusta – Lat: 32:22.914 Long: 137:51.327)

On the morning of 5 April 2007 I stuck my head through my tent flap and breathed deeply. It was cool and there was a slight breeze ruffling the tree tops around the park. The sun was rising and the birds sounded happy, joyous even. There was no movement among the caravanners which was not surprising – I'd long been aware that people who tow caravans tend to talk late into the night, only to emerge scratching and shuffling into the new day well after the best part is over.

I have often been asked how I felt on that morning. Was I excited? … expectant? … nervous? In truth, I was none of these things. I wouldn't go so far as to say that it I regarded it as just another day, but I cannot lay claim to any passionate feelings, other than being happy to be on my way.

By 6.30am I had showered and had my last shave – I intended growing a beard. I then packed and was ready to roll.

As I was leaving the caravan park to 'dip my toe' in Spencer Gulf a few hundred metres down the road, it occurred to me that a photograph of this significant event might be useful. I was hovering near the caravan park gates undecided how to go about it when an early morning walker approached. I felt a tad self-conscious with my floppy hat on my head, my huge backpack and the solar panel hanging down my back, but I waddled towards him and said, 'Excuse me, I er … I'm just heading off through the middle of Australia and I wondered if you'd mind taking a photograph.' He readily agreed and when I suggested walking to the water at the end of the road for a shot of me with a foot in the gulf, he said, 'Good idea, lets go,' His three photographs would

become an important part of my pictorial record of the walk.

The pictures taken, I took one last look at the water, turned my back and at 7.30am, I took my first step towards the interior. Put like that it sounds a momentous occasion but it quickly turned to anti-climax – a kilometre down the road I stopped at a Mobil service station, unloaded my pack, found a table in the tearoom and ordered bacon, eggs, sausages, hash browns and coffee.

'Why not?' I asked myself. 'Last chance for a week. Bugger the cholesterol!'

While awaiting the arrival of this nosh-up I sent group SMS messages to about thirty people advising them that the great walk was under way. Good luck messages were coming in before I'd finished my meal. When I left the service station I headed ENE in a condition which can only be described as replete.

I had planned to buy some fruit before leaving the town. I intended carrying it in a plastic bag and eating it over the first couple of days, but when I passed the last houses with no sign of a shop I realised I had left it too late. No matter, I had my eight litres of water, sachets of two-minute noodles, some powdered soups, powdered milk, and banana flavouring to add to the milk – enough for six days.

I have been asked how I could hope to survive on such a meagre diet. Of course I could not, but because I would be sticking to roads, I knew I would be able to find food at towns and mining camps, and at various settlements along the way. That aside I can honestly say that I do not suffer from hunger. If there is a meal available I will eat it but if there is nothing but a cup of soup and some two-minute noodles, it will not worry me. I am quite happy, for instance, to start my day with a cup of water and no breakfast. But when presented with the opportunity for a full English breakfast – as at the Port Augusta roadhouse – I am unlikely to be found wanting.

After about a kilometre I turned on to a gravel service road and settled into a steady walking speed of just under 5 km/h. I knew from previous experience that it was best to regulate my speed according to the temperature – faster in the morning when it is cool, and a little slower in the heat of the afternoon. My body was now a machine and the amount of energy I was expending had to be regulated according to the conditions. The important thing was to keep moving. It would be all too easy to take an extended break at 2pm and still be there the following morning. My walk might degenerate into a shuffle but I had to keep going because even shuffling put kilometres behind me.

I soon found myself in a maze of minor roads heading off in all directions. When I came to one signed 'Racecourse Road' I consulted my map and was relieved to find a racecourse clearly marked along my route.

The country soon gave way to a flat land of coarse, low scrub stretching to the Flinders Ranges on my right and a saucer horizon on the left. There was no cloud in the sky and the temperature was rising rapidly. The flies had also risen. I'm accustomed to flies, I can usually work with them, but these blighters were already making a nuisance of themselves. A taste of things to come?

The road surface was stony but not uncomfortable and the railway line was still alongside when I came to a sign announcing the City of Port Augusta's northern limit. I had been walking three hours without seeing a vehicle.

About 1pm I was starting to feel tired, and my shoulders were aching from the weight of the pack. I began searching the horizon for a shady spot to have a rest but the prospects were not good. Then I spied a concrete railway culvert. It's amazing how attractive a concrete railway culvert can appear when you've been out in the sun a few hours. Gratefully, I slid the pack from my back, propped it against the side of the culvert so that the solar panel was facing the sun, and entered my first refuge. I was not alone, there were several fairy martin nests clinging to the angle between the roof and walls. My culvert's 'backdoor' also commanded a splendid view of the Flinders Ranges. I sipped some water, took some photographs and sat with my legs stretched out to relieve my feet. I felt thoroughly at home.

I allowed myself twenty minutes' rest before hoisting my pack on to my back and resuming my walk. I hadn't been long gone when a motorcyclist passed, heading towards Port Augusta. It was the first vehicle I had seen. We exchanged waves – then we did it again when he returned an hour or so later. Getting busy, I thought.

My first map showed something called 'The Ten Mile' about fifteen kilometres from Port Augusta. I had no idea what was there but in the absence of anywhere else, I half decided that it might prove a good place to spend my first night.

The Ten Mile turned out to be a creek crossing with some splendid old river red gums growing along the bank. There was no culvert, the road merely dipped into the creek bed, and it would undoubtedly flood if there was heavy rain. I knew I couldn't afford to be over-fussy about where I camped but I did need firewood, a tree for my radio antenna, and a flat sandy, clay or fine gravel surface for my tent. The Ten Mile had all of this and more. It was almost perfect. I was aware of the golden rule – never camp in a creek bed in case of flooding – but I knew there had been no rain in the area or upstream. My risk assessment was that there was Buckley's chance of flooding.

I now began a routine which I would be following most afternoons for the next few months. I heaved the pack from my back, had a look around and

chose the site for my tent. I took off my boots and slipped on the thongs which normally travel strapped to the bottom of my pack. I unpacked my ground sheet and tent and, within half an hour, I had the tent erected.

Next the radio. I tied one end of my Venetian cord to a small rock, and the other end to my antenna. I threw the rock over a tree branch and pulled up the antenna with the attached cord. I then connected the antenna and batteries to the radio. I immediately began receiving transmissions from other ham operators, though nothing from Bill or Roger. But that was all right, I wasn't scheduled to make contact until 5.30pm. I would wait.

At 5.30 on the stroke, I called Roger: *VK4 bravo november quebec this is VK4 x-ray juliet juliet portable 5*.

(For those unfamiliar with radio procedures I should explain that Roger's call sign was VK4BNQ and mine was VK4XJJ. 'VK' was Australia, 4 was my home state and 'portable' indicated that I was not in my home state. Our chosen frequency was 7.040 MHz lower sideband).

My call to Roger was unanswered.

I tried Bill: *VK2 foxtrot whisky golf juliet this is VK4 x-ray juliet juliet portable 5.*

No answer.

This was of concern. I knew that radio contact with Bill would be unreliable because, like me, he had a low-power 5 watt radio and a less-than-perfect antenna system. But Roger was more experienced and he had very good equipment.

I eventually realised that my batteries were flat. I could scarcely believe it – my solar panel had been in the sun all day yet the batteries had lasted just ten minutes. I was flabbergasted. Had I miscalculated? I couldn't have, I'd worked it all out a dozen times.

I tinkered with the radio but there was no doubting it – the batteries were as flat as the proverbial tack.

I knew I could transmit Morse code if necessary (the radio had a button for that purpose) but my skills were almost non-existent. So were Bill's.

Disappointed, I left the radio connected up, intending to try again in the morning. Then, because I was still within range, I rang Bill on my cell phone and told him what had happened.

There was plenty of firewood but I did not light a fire on my first night. Feeling no need for a hot meal I opted for a cup of powdered milk with banana flavouring. Then I settled down to study my maps using a wind-up torch. (I love wind-up torches. They have a handle which turns an intricate gearing system which spins an alternator at high speed. Mine was presented to me by Evan, my houseboat neighbour, after I had broken my first one on an earlier walk).

I had the best part of twelve hours of darkness ahead of me and no book to read – weight had ruled out such a luxury. But that was the least of my concerns.

I was in bed by 9.30pm enjoying the vast silence of the Australian bush. I had covered only twenty kilometres, a bit below my target, but it had been a late start and it was my first day. I slept like a baby.

CHAPTER 5

An embarrassing mistake

6 – 7 April, days 2 – 3

(29km NNE Port Augusta – Lat: 32:13.669 Long: 137:52.156)

I was awake early, anxious to start the new day. It was cool, seventeen degrees according to my thermometer, but it felt good. A perfect day for walking. My antenna was still up but the batteries were so low they barely ran the receiver, never mind the transmitter. I packed away the radio equipment in disgust.

I checked my water and found I still had six litres. It was enough for three days though I hoped to top up from a dam or waterhole, or perhaps at a sheep station I knew was just ahead and not far off the road. I meanwhile carried two 750ml iced coffee containers of water and Power Aid at my front. I was happy that no sunlight would penetrate the containers and I enjoyed the coffee-cum-Power Aid flavour. The drink was soon tepid but that was something I knew I could live with – make that, something I would *have* to live with: tepid water and flies.

Those flies! It was as though word had spread across the nation that I was walking through the middle, and if any fly wanted a free trip, come on over and hop aboard.

Get used to it, Jeff, I told myself. It was a mantra I would repeat countless times. *Get used to it, Jeff.*

It felt good to be back on the road again. The country remained typically Australian outback: no trees, flat distant horizons with some scraggy looking shrubs away over in the west, and the Flinders Ranges to the east.

The wind freshened and began gusting at 25 km/h causing my solar panel to flap around on my back which was irritating. I re-positioned it across my front where I could hang on to it, and where it was facing the sun.

Solar panel … facing the sun!

I shook my head in disbelief. How could I have been so bloody stupid? Of course the solar panel had to face the sun, o*therwise it wouldn't work*. I groaned out loud. The much-experienced trekker and bushman was walking north with his solar panel carefully mounted on his back in permanent shade! No wonder the bloody batteries were flat. I felt more than a little foolish. However, I was also relieved that I appeared to have solved the battery problem. As I would be heading roughly north throughout the walk, the solar panel could stay mounted across my front where it would work at maximum efficiency, and where I could stop it flapping. Perfect. My stride lengthened. I could almost feel the current surging into my batteries.

There appeared on my left a two-metre shrub. It says something about the country, first that I noticed it, and second that I saw fit to note the event in my diary. I took advantage of its small pool of shade to take a brief rest. It was 10am, I had covered only seven kilometres – and I did not have enough food to reach Hawker. A decision would have to be made but I decided to leave it until my lunch break.

It was now twenty-six degrees and the flies were becoming even friendlier. More important, I was starting to realise that I was out of condition. I had thought I was fit but it was already apparent that walking this far every day on a restricted diet was more physically demanding than I had expected. I weighed eighty-nine kilos when I left Bill's place a fortnight earlier, but I reckoned I'd put on a couple more, courtesy of several visits to hospitable relatives. I wondered how much I would lose before reaching the end of my journey.

After I left my little bush the wind dropped which didn't make much difference to me but it made it easier for the flies. I checked my cell phone: just two bars on the antenna indicator. I sent an SMS to Bill, telling him my position.

I crossed a couple of dry creek beds where more giant river red gums grew. They are wonderful trees with shiny cream-coloured trunks, and branches growing thick and strong, throwing deep inviting shade in a way that encapsulates the Australian bush. I thought there might be some water or even a damp spot where I could dig for it. No such luck, the creek bed was as dry as lizard road-kill. I photographed the trees and pressed on, putting off any decision about increasing my walking speed until evening. Anyway, I needed a few more kilometres behind me before I could call a halt with an easy conscience. I was aiming to reach the turn-off to Narcoona Station where my map indicated there was a waterway called Thompson Creek.

I arrived late in the afternoon. It was an attractive creek, lined with the

inevitable river red gums which were moving slightly in a gentle breeze. There was shade, there was firewood and there was somewhere to erect my tent. There was everything but water. Disappointed, I pulled off my pack then my boots. I had noticed some soreness in my left foot and when I inspected the area I found that I'd developed a blister about the size of a five cent piece on the navicular bone, just behind my big toe. I made a mental note to keep an eye on it. Apart from that I was feeling in reasonable fettle. The lack of water was regrettable but it was of no serious concern, I had enough to keep me going for a while yet.

When I checked the AA batteries in the pack they all measured low. This was a bitter disappointment as I had convinced myself that carrying the solar panel on my front had solved the problem. But there had been plenty of time to re-charge them, so it wasn't that. I finally accepted that there was a fault in my equipment.

I hooked up four batteries from the camera, four camera spares and two of the best from the original pack, hoping they would have the power for at least one brief radio contact with Bill or Roger. I also began charging the mobile phone with the car charger connected to the 12 volt pack with alligator clip leads. Radio contact failed though I did not try very long as I felt I had to conserve what little power was left in the batteries.

I drank a cup of cold soup for dinner and began studying my map.

My original plan was to go to Hawker, a distance of 120 kilometres, which I expected to do in five or six days. My problem was that because I was travelling slower than expected, I had neither the food nor the water to safely cover the distance. (I could have made it to Hawker at a pinch but I had not embarked on an endurance test, nor was I trying to emulate the feats of early explorers). I decided that the solution was to cut through the Flinders Ranges to Quorn where I could re-supply, then follow the bitumen for three days to Hawker. My map showed a four-wheel-drive road running east-west across the ranges which was just what I wanted. It would take me through a feature called Thompsons Gap and to within reasonable walking distance of Quorn.

*

I was awake long before sunrise and raring to go. I'd had enough sleep so when the first pink shades of dawn stole silently over the land I crawled from my tent and began packing up. I had a mug of powdered milk flavoured with banana Quik and, by 7.30am, I was booted and spurred and ready for the road. (I had told Bill by phone the previous night that there would be no morning radio 'sched').

I turned on to the dirt road heading east and had walked only a hundred

metres when I came across a family of campers having breakfast. They were travelling in a four-wheel-drive, a sedan and, for good measure, a couple of trail bikes for the kids.

A bloke in stubby shorts and thongs saw me. 'Wanna cuppa, mate?' he yelled.

'Yeah, ta.' I dropped my pack and walked over.

After we had introduced ourselves Dad asked: 'What are yer doin' on foot out 'ere, mate? There's nothin' 'ere.'

I briefly explained my planned walk, saying that I had been heading up the road along the railway line but had decided to save time by cutting through the ranges. He looked dubious.

'There's no road through them hills,' he said nodding towards the ranges. 'We live in Quorn about fifteen kilometres on the other side. We come out here campin' and four-wheel-drivin' and there's no road through there.' His family nodded in agreement but I noticed the kids had pricked their ears. If there was an unexplored track in the vicinity they obviously wanted to try the trail bikes on it.

I spread my map on the car's bonnet and pointed out the trail to the now-curious family.

'I'll be damned,' said Dad. 'Never knew that was there. Jeez, that'd save us a long drive back to Quorn.'

The boys rushed for the trail bikes.

'Not so fast,' said Dad. 'We've gotta break camp before we go anywhere.'

After finishing my cuppa I thanked them, hefted my pack on to my shoulders and struck off along the road towards the foothills. I had followed it east about four kilometres to where it turned into the hills to Thompsons Gap when I came to a recently abandoned shack. Its tin walls and roof were in pretty good condition, and there were locks and signs to keep people out. In contrast, a nearby bore, tank and trough looked as though they had seen better days.

As it was already 11am I decided to take advantage of the shade to have a break and wait for the boys on their trail bikes. I had been enjoying the solitude for about forty-five minutes and had decided to push on when the silence was broken by the sound of revving trail bikes. The boys pulled up, switched off their engines and apologised for being late. They said they had first tried to negotiate the track by car but had been forced to return for the bikes when they were unable to cross a dry creek bed. We talked for a while then they headed off to cross the ranges to Quorn.

I followed them until I came to a fence across the road with a ridiculously small sign advising tourists walking the Hewson Trail to follow the fence.

My four-wheel-drive track now plunged into some seriously hilly country that was hard on my feet, not to mention my stamina. I'd built up a good sweat when the soft sigh of the wind was again shattered by trail bike engines. Skidding to a halt the boys said they had been stopped by a gate but they had lifted it off its hinges and followed the track to where it met the road into Quorn. Then they roared off to their overnight campsite leaving me to resume my walk.

To my dismay the road became even more difficult, forcing me to walk for two minutes and rest for five. It was steep and the loose stone underfoot made it difficult to get a grip without skidding and sliding all over the place. I could see why the boys thought it dangerous. I looked for shade to have a rest but the country was too harsh to support much in the way of trees or shrubs. Panting with exhaustion, I stumbled along the track cursing the heat, the flies and the unevenness of the track.

After five kilometres (I checked the distance later on my map because it seemed more like twenty-five) … after five kilometres the terrain levelled a little and I passed through Thompsons Gap and on to a sheep station. I was now in wild, hilly country in which sparse, tinder-dry vegetation struggled to survive on the steep contours.

I emerged near the back of a station homestead, tucked into the eastern foothills. The scene was in sharp contrast to the country I had just traversed. There was a lush green lawn, a garden gate, power lines and a television antenna. Civilisation!

I walked to the front gate and called out, 'Anyone home?'

There was no answer.

'HELLO … ANYONE HOME?'

Still no answer. (Several days later I remembered it had been Easter. The family would almost certainly have been away for the weekend).

I eyed their lawn. It was tempting to go through the gate and stretch out on the grass but I knew it wouldn't have been right. Exhausted, I slipped off the pack and found a clean area where I could take the weight off my feet. I had a sip of water, pulled out my map, glanced at my watch and took stock. It was 3pm and I was only five kilometres from the Quorn road, and fifteen from Quorn.

Knowing there would be a station access road, I decided to keep going. I found it easily enough but when I came to the Quorn road and discovered a reasonable campsite alongside Ingaree Creek, I didn't hesitate. I was not walking another step.

I rang Bill on the cell phone telling him I would be in Quorn in the morning.

Then I erected my tent, had some soup and flopped to the ground dog tired. The climb through the ranges had taken a lot out of me but I was on a high. I had taken the decision to follow a track which even the locals didn't know existed, and I had emerged at the other end undamaged. I felt that evening that I had the stamina and equipment to go anywhere. I'd covered about eighteen kilometres, including the 'road from hell', and I'd lived to tell the tale. It was a good feeling for an old bloke.

But I was buggered, and when the sun went down on my third day I was already in my tent and drifting comfortably into a well-earned sleep. Nothing, I thought, could possibly disturb me.

CHAPTER 6

Attacked by hoons

8 –10 April, days 4 – 6

(Quorn – Lat: 32:20.579 Long: 138:02.398)

It was not quite day four; it was still day three, approaching midnight. It was also Easter Saturday, though I was still unaware of that.

I was sound asleep, oblivious.

Crash.

I sat bolt upright, sleep-drugged, straining to hear. It sounded like broken glass tinkling down the rocks near my tent.

It couldn't be.

Nervous now, I shifted my position slightly and listened.

Now there were voices, indistinct but not too far away. They sounded excited. Then I heard the sound of a car receding in the distance.

Silence.

For the first time since starting my walk I became conscious of my vulnerability in the bush.

Slowly I unzipped the tent opening and crawled out into bright moonlight in my underwear.

I had barely cleared the tent when I heard the car come to a stop about three hundred metres away to the south.

I was now gripped by genuine fear which is a polite way of saying I was scared shitless. In fact I can't remember being so scared. I'm a bloke with a strong survival instinct. I have built-in conflict-avoidance radar. I *avoid* trouble, I do not seek it out. If I'm driving in the city and somebody overtakes me and squeezes in front, I pull back and give him space. It makes me feel good – I reckon I've emerged from the situation more civilised than the clown who has gained a car length.

I was still out in the open, frozen with fear and cursing the moonlight which was turning night into day, when the car started up again, made a U-turn and headed slowly back towards my camp.

Now there were voices from inside the car, and they were definitely excited. My aforementioned built-in radar system was emitting warning signals so loud I half expected the intruders to hear them.

The school of thought concerning whether to camp near the road or away from it now flashed through my mind. Some say that if you camp too far away, you are out of sight if you need help. Others claim that camping too close makes you visible to every passerby. I'd opted for the latter because of my confidence in the decency of my fellow man. Maybe it was time to re-think that one.

Knowing I would be seen in the moonlight, I ducked behind the tent.

Rocks began hitting the ground around me. I didn't think they had seen me, it was more as though they were just taking potshots in my general direction.

They were now close enough for me to hear what was being said.

'I reckon I scored a hit' said one.

'Nah, ya missed again.'

The car's headlights were shining north past my camp.

I don't think I was scared of being hit by their missiles because they were obviously poor shots. There were no Andrew Symonds among them. Besides, I reckoned I could dodge the rocks if I had to.

It was the unknown that frightened me. *What the hell was going on? Will their heightened excitement develop into blood-lust? Is this going to escalate?*

There was a lull in activity and I decided to crawl back into the tent and grab a few things before they launched another attack. Silently I eased myself back through the fly. Fortunately I knew precisely where everything was – I knew I could put my hand on anything I wanted. But what do you take and what do you leave in such a situation? It was like seeing your house go up in flames … do you save the family photos? The antique vase handed down by great-grandma? The irreplaceable painting said to be an original?

My radio was the most expensive item. But there was also my camera with the pictures I'd taken to record the journey.

Some clothes? My wallet?

Yes, my wallet, it held my driving licence (that would identify my body!). And my credit cards. Oh, and the torch. Thanks Evan … knew it would come in useful. That will have to do.

Clutching my wallet and torch to my chest I crawled back out through

the tent fly and headed for the scrub, away from the road. The bush wasn't thick but I reckoned they wouldn't spend too much time searching for me. It was so light I could see where I was going which was a mixed blessing – If I could see, so could they. I felt exposed and naked, which wasn't far from the truth.

The car turned again, its headlights sweeping a wide arc until they were shining south.

I stumbled on until I reached a clump of low trees. Selecting the biggest I hid behind it, lying flat on the ground. I was aware of my heart beating wildly. I peered round the tree trunk as the vehicle – I now saw that it was a utility – cruised past my camp. I could see two blokes standing in the back launching missiles at my tent. They were laughing like lunatics, yelling encouragement and friendly abuse at each other. There were others inside the vehicle egging them on with calls of derision or acclaim, depending on where their missiles landed. I had no idea where they were landing because the tent was now out of view.

They eventually tired of their sport and disappeared south towards Quorn.

I breathed a sigh of relief, flicked on my torch and hauled myself to my feet. Carefully I picked my way back to my campsite which was suddenly looking very vulnerable.

I was still fearful. Perhaps they would come back with more mates and some booze, maybe with some improvised Molotov cocktails. They might get some bows and arrows and form themselves into a hunting party.

It sounds far-fetched today but it happens – and on that moonlit night my imagination was in overdrive.

I had embarked on this walk prepared for attacks by wild pigs, camels and dingos. I knew there were strong possibilities of being bitten by snakes and spiders, and I was ready for that as well. But being set upon by a gang of dangerous idiots looking for kicks was something I had considered but not expected.

For the first time, I thought about calling off the walk. I was still shaking, my heart was pumping too fast and I was half-expecting my assailants to come back and finish the job. Who needed this?

One thing was certain: I had to get clear of there. I would pack my tent and head for Quorn, ten kilometres away. It was now midnight; I'd be there by 2.30am.

I was back on the road at 12.30am, the walking conditions almost perfect. There was still plenty of moonlight, it was cool, there were no flies and the Australian bush was at its most magical. I found I was enjoying myself.

I had considered walking at night during my early planning but I'd discarded the idea. One reason was that it would have meant packing up before sunrise and risking leaving things behind. Finding a good campsite and gathering firewood in the dark would also be difficult, not to mention setting up the antenna (about thirty minutes) in time for the 5.30pm radio sched. Apart from all that I reckoned an eight or ten-hour day was more than enough for an old bloke.

But this was very agreeable indeed. The full moon hung like a Christmas tree decoration, casting dark shadows across the silvery landscape. There were no clouds, no wind, nothing to mar the perfection.

I kept my ears cocked – I was constantly looking for a suitable place to dive off the side of the road at the first sound of an approaching vehicle. Loss of face was of no concern to me; if the situation called for me to cower behind a bush, that was what I would do.

My mind went back to the late 1970s when I was living in Broome, WA, and had acquired an air charter outfit. The owner, who was going broke, had intended walking away from the business but he had given it to me instead. The twin-engine Partnavia P68B was on 'dry hire' which meant I was responsible for fuel and maintenance costs and that I paid its owner by the charter hour. I thus inherited a plane and a pilot – but I had been keen to get a basic pilot's licence myself. Part of the training had involved keeping a look-out for somewhere to make an emergency landing … which was what I was doing now. My little air charter business had prospered, I'd done well out of it. I was now hoping fate would again be kind to me.

It was. No utility came along, or any other vehicle for that matter. I had the road and the bush to myself which was just fine. The closer I came to Quorn the more I relaxed. Then a dog howled, and another shiver crept up my spine. I scanned the bush in the direction of the bark and saw a light shining from a house window. Somebody was up and about early, or perhaps they had just left the light on all night.

I breasted a small rise and saw the lights of Quorn in the distance. Quiet, sleepy Quorn.

I followed the signs through the town to the caravan park. There was nobody about, it was like walking through a ghost town except that this was a living, breathing community where people worked and played and raised their kids.

When I found the caravan park I walked quietly past the darkened office to a small grassy area where there were a couple of tents. I had already decided that I would erect my tent without waking anybody from the park's administration.

I figured that the last thing they would want would be somebody knocking them up in the early hours of the morning seeking permission to check in. I'd do that later in the morning.

Working as quietly as possible I erected my tent alongside some others. But I wasn't quiet enough – I woke one of the occupants who, curiosity aroused, wanted to know why I was arriving so late. I apologised profusely for disturbing him and, under his prompting, gave him a brief account of what I was doing, promising to tell him more over morning coffee. Then I crawled into my tent and was asleep almost immediately. I had walked twenty-eight kilometres over tough country with only a few hours' sleep. I'd never before walked so far in one day.

*

I'm usually awake pretty early but on the morning of 7 April it was 7.30 before I poked my head outside and greeted the new day. I couldn't remember when I last slept so late.

My tent neighbours were John and Richard, regular Melbourne distance cyclists who were spending their holiday on a three-week ride to Wilpena and back. I watched them pack their tents and re-stack their bikes – it was quite a business. I had considered riding a bicycle rather than walking but after watching John and Richard do what they had to do, I decided it was much easier to pack your backpack and walk away. Their stories of riding up hills on the Mawson cycle trail only confirmed my opinion – tracks strewn with rocks and fallen branches, scary downhill sections – not for me. I hoped my smugness wasn't too evident.

When I told them about my experience with the rock-chuckers their immediate reaction was: 'Don't let those bastards stop you. The chance of that happening again is minimal and the further you get away from civilisation, the less chance.'

I was starting to think the same way myself; a few hours' sleep, a brand new day, a clear sky and a beckoning horizon had worked wonders. When I rang Bill an hour later, all thoughts of abandoning the project had faded into the past. And Bill agreed that I should carry on.

I later made a few inquiries about who could have been involved in the attack and the general feeling was that it would have been some hoons up from Port Augusta or Adelaide for the long weekend.

I spent the day wandering around Quorn which has some beautifully restored buildings, not to mention the Pichi Richi railway. A considerable amount of money has been spent there, and it shows.

The Quandong Café caught my eye. It's a traditional country town

establishment with a verandah over the footpath and a bold sign on the street wall. Suddenly aware that I had not eaten much for a few days, I ordered something to eat. The steak sandwich served up by the Quorn Café that day was without peer. It was tender, it dripped juice, it was ever so slightly singed and it was liberally covered with onion. I can still make my mouth water just by thinking of it.

With stomach bulging I found the supermarket where I bought that night's dinner: sliced bread, some sausages, a small tub of margarine and a bottle of BBQ sauce.

I decided to stay an extra day. Gary and Bronwyn Lucas, who run the caravan park, had already made a donation equivalent to my camp fee to DeafBlind, so I thought it only fair to offer to do a bit of work for them. Gary said that the Maytag commercial washing machine was leaking and the old cordless office phone had lost some of its range. No problem. Jobs like that are right up my alley. I said I would make a start in the morning.

Determined to fix my 'battery-charging' solar panel, I first spread out my electrical kit of batteries, wire, multi-meter and some small tools in the camp kitchen.

I had already decided that a significant number of my twenty 'AA' Nickel Metal Hydride batteries must be faulty. I'd bought them from my favourite Jaycar electronics shop on the Gold Coast, which generally sold quality products, but it was pretty obvious to me that some crook batteries had slipped through the net.

Fortunately, I was carrying a cheap multi-meter which I'd chosen because it was light and … well, cheap. Congratulating myself on my foresight I began measuring each individual cell and sorting them into voltage ratings. However, this told me only the battery's state of charge; it was no indication of how it would perform. I needed to check each cell under load which was tricky. Some lateral thinking solved the problem – I would check each cell while charging from the solar panel.

I moved my 'workshop' to a picnic table outside the kitchen where the solar panel would be in the sun. Using a couple of small jumper leads (I never leave home without them) I wired up the solar panel, a battery in a 4 X 'AA' holder and the multi-meter which was set up to measure 200ma.

I knew that the solar panel would put out a maximum of 400ma, which was too much. The optimum rate for a 2500ma 'AA' NiMH is just 250ma, but I was under a gum tree in semi-shade and I could aim the solar panel away from the sun as a crude current regulator.

The result left me flabbergasted. I reckoned I'd already estimated the solar

panel's output, but the meter was telling me I was getting only 15ma. I moved the solar panel to a sunnier spot but it made no difference. I looked around – shade everywhere. It was the first time I'd cursed shade in a caravan park.

Exasperated, I bundled everything together and carried it a hundred metres into full sun.

Still 15ma! I couldn't believe it. I tried a different battery in case it was faulty and not presenting a load. No change.

Then the penny dropped. Maybe it wasn't the batteries; maybe my much-loved solar panel was not generating enough current.

I remembered that it was possible to short circuit a solar panel. Taking a reading of the maximum-current-out, I set up the multi-meter to take a measurement. More horror – still only 15ma.

I tested the connectors. They were fine. I tested the wires exiting the solar panel – always an early suspect with electrical gear – but they were perfect. In frustration, I held the wretched solar panel in front of me and shook it like Rolf Harris with his wobble board. That was when the multi-meter caught my eye – it was registering changes of 15ma to greater than 200ma. It happened every time I wobbled the panel. I stared at it mesmerised. Every time I flexed the panel the meter changed.

The penny didn't just drop, it plummeted with a resounding clunk. It *definitely* wasn't the batteries. I'd got it wrong.

The reading indicating more than 200ma was telling me that the current was greater than the meter could display, while set at 200ma maximum.

I changed the meter to read 10A (1000ma) maximum, and started again. It was easy to make it vary from 15ma to 300ma. I did some specific flexing and soon found that I could hold the panel so that it put out the current for which it was designed.

This was good news and bad news. The good news was that I could probably fix the fault well enough to keep my batteries charged to run my extensive electronic gear. The bad news was that my self-belief had taken a battering. I'd assumed the batteries were faulty when they were not, and I had heard no warning bells when I found the hard-to-get solar panel in a damaged box in a back block in Dapto.

Using my venetian cord I tied the solar panel into a distorted shape like a badly wrapped Christmas present so that it would do its job. There were momentary good results but I knew I couldn't walk across Australia with such a misshapen bundle hanging around my neck. I tore the cord off and sat fingering the solar panel, glaring malevolently at its seemingly useless panels.

I knew it was made up of quite a few cells, wired in series and parallel,

to produce voltage and current. There obviously had to be a lot of internal junctions, probably metal strips of some kind, which were spot welded and would not take solder easily. Like most 'techos' I've pulled apart a few solar-powered garden lights so I have a reasonable working knowledge of how they are manufactured.

I began experimenting with this one, testing and examining it in a specific pattern like a doctor looking for a broken rib. Concentrating on position and pressure, I eventually found a 'sweet spot' where, if I applied firm finger-and-thumb pressure the panel put out its 300ma. It didn't matter how much I flexed or twisted it, the solar panel produced the requisite power – *as long as I held that spot*.

Eureka! This *was* fixable.

I remembered from yesterday's trip into town a fascinating shop, a virtual emporium, which sold just about everything. I had bought some batteries there for my camera. The owner, a bloke in his seventies, had explained in great technical detail why 'primary' NiMH batteries were superior to ordinary heavy duty (or even alkaline) batteries, specifically for use in a digital camera. This, I decided was my man.

I headed back to the shop carrying the solar panel, jumper leads – everything – and asked if there was a gadget among his vast store of bits and bobs that would apply the right amount of pressure to my solar panel's 'sweet spot'.

He didn't hesitate. I had failed to even present him with a challenge. Beckoning me with a slight wave of the hand, we proceeded along lines of dusty shelves where he unearthed a bubble-pack of three small G-clamps with throats deep enough to reach the 'sweet spot'.

I ripped the pack open, found a small pool of light under the skylight and set up the solar panel with a G-clamp in place. Other customers gathered around to watch.

It worked to perfection.

I handed over $3 (GST inclusive) and floated back to the caravan park, my solar panel problem solved.

I now turned my attention to the caravan park's problems. First, the leaking washing machine – (Lord, how I hate washing machines!) Undeterred, I started a cycle and almost immediately heard water running from under the machine. Turning it off, I tipped it back so that it was resting on the wall and found a bottom seal leaking water over the gearbox. I showed it to Gary and explained how it could be fixed.

Next, the cordless phone. Gary explained that he needed to use it from

the town centre which, although less than a kilometer away, was beyond its range. When the external antenna and mast were installed several years ago it had worked fine but its range had deteriorated over time and now there were even dead spots at the back of the caravan park.

We pulled down the antenna mast, undid all the tapes and cable ties and examined the connections. Some were loose but they were all clean. I tightened the connections where necessary, tested for open and short circuits and reassembled everything. There was no noticeable improvement. I suspected that several large trees in the immediate vicinity were the problem but there was nothing more I could do. I hadn't been much help but I think Gary appreciated my efforts.

As I had lost some body weight since leaving Port Augusta I took advantage of my Quorn sojourn to put a bit back – high calorie sausages for breakfast and lunch and plenty of bread. This would be my pattern in the coming weeks: stuffing myself with high carbohydrate foods when they were available, and making do during the lean times on the road.

I met some interesting people in Quorn. One bloke, Graham, who was near retirement age and travelling in a self-contained one-tonne van, intended riding a bike along a section of the Mawson Trail for a couple of days. Another couple and their six-year-old daughter were walking a stage of the Heysen Trail which extends 1200 kilometers from Cape Jervis to Parachilna Gorge, in the Flinders Ranges.

I finished the last of the sausages and bread for dinner and, because I would be leaving early in the morning, I said my goodbyes to Gary and Bronwyn. I'd been there only a couple of days yet it was like parting from old friends.

That evening I heard Lloyd (VK2FLYD), a neighbour of Bill's, calling on the radio from Newcastle. Bill had told me I would probably hear from him from time to time. I tried to call him back but received no recognition. I put it down to severe background noise. It sounded like static from a generator or a 'noisy' fluorescent light. Nevertheless I decided that I had to get my communications working properly.

*

By first light – 6.15am at that time of year – I had packed up, tidied up and cleaned up, and was ready for the road. As usual there was nobody around when I left the caravan park, even the town was asleep. This was a surprise because I had always thought country people were up at dawn. Maybe it was just the farmers.

The next town was Hawker, sixty-four kilometres away by road. I say, 'By road' because my GPS showed it as sixty-two kilometres, but the GPS reading

was as the crow flies, and I was no crow.

I plodded along Park Terrace and through an industrial area to Pichi Richi Creek then turned left on to the main road. All I had to do now was follow the signs to Hawker.

I was walking under a clear sky and feeling chipper when I heard a key rattle in my pocket. I knew immediately what it was. I'd forgotten to hand in the key to the caravan park's ablution block. This presented a dilemma. I'd come only eight kilometres – if I'd been in a car I would have turned around and taken it back. But I was walking. Eight kilometres there, another eight back … but hell, I was walking 2500 kilometres, what's another sixteen? I'd started this trip determined to take my time and not to hurry. 'Smell the roses,' I'd told myself. Smell the roses! I'd been baulking at retracing my steps for five minutes to take a photograph! Now I was hesitating over losing a few hours to return a key. Even so …

I stopped at a reasonable looking spot on the side of the road and pulled out my mobile phone. Finding that I was still within range of Quorn, I rang Bill and asked him to email Gary that I would be posting the key back to him from Hawker. I was half way through this when a motorist flashed past. He pulled up a hundred metres down the road and turned back. Opening his window, he yelled, 'You all right, mate?'

'Yeah, sure. Thanks for stopping.'

'Thought you might be phoning for help or something.'

We told each other what we were doing then he made a U-turn and disappeared towards Hawker.

I put my phone away and returned to the road with a sense of well-being over the thoughtfulness of this stranger who had been concerned enough to make sure I was all right. I was also relieved at Bill's news that my new glasses had arrived in Newcastle from Queensland and that he was sending them on to Hawker.

I'd had my eyes tested several months before I left Queensland and had requested that the new lenses be fitted to a pair of coalmine safety glasses I had inherited. However, I had departed Beaudesert before they were ready and had left instructions for them to be mailed on to Bill. He was also sending me a multi-output plug pack in case my solar panel let me down again. It was all good news.

I was conscious of the fact that after Hawker my mobile phone would be out of range for at least two months. Apart from the obvious safety concern, it meant that during the most important part of my journey I would be out of contact for interviews with radio stations. This was serious because we were

relying heavily on publicity to generate funds for DeafBlind. As I mentioned earlier, a satellite phone had been considered but had been ruled out because of cost. However, now that I was moving out of cell phone range Janne Bidenko of DeafBlind discussed the problem with her colleagues. The upshot was that DeafBlind took the big decision to organise and pay for a sat phone, on the understanding that it was sold when I finished the walk, and the proceeds returned to the organisation. The phone would be waiting for me at Hawker.

The country north of Quorn was pretty barren with a few low, scrubby trees. It was also infested with flies. I thought they had been bad before, but they now descended on me in swarms. I was walking with my arms rotating like windmills, trying to stop them settling on my face where the only moisture within cooee was to be found. I couldn't help wondering how the hell they would have managed if I hadn't come along. Would they have died of thirst? I had intended getting a face net when I was in Quorn but they hadn't been too bad there, and I'd forgotten about it. Now, I would have given my dentures for a fly net.

After lunch (a drink of water under a red river gum) I was back in my stride, my arms flailing at the buzzing millions. One fly was being particularly persistent. It was crawling up my nose, into the corners of my eyes, it even managed to wedge itself in my right ear. I swiped furiously at it. Disaster. I accidentally hooked my thumb under my glasses which went skittering across the road.

'Shit.'

Bending low – not easy with a backpack – I began scrabbling around like Mister Magoo. Taking advantage of the situation, the flies whistled up more mates.

Scrabble … swat … scrabble … swat. I won't record what I was saying.

When I found the glasses I fumbled them back on to my nose. But something was wrong. Working my fingers along the frames I realised that a lens had fallen out and the frame was broken. Dropping back to my knees I closed one eye and began searching for the missing lens.

More flies arrived.

Undaunted I continued my search on all fours, my hands sweeping across the bitumen, my backpack wobbling like a camel's hump. I eventually found the lens and placed it carefully in my pocket. I then climbed unsteadily to my feet and, with one eye semi-operational and the other near-useless, I continued north.

'Get used to it, Jeff,' I said.

I had gone only a little way when I head a car approaching from behind.

It was a small two-door vehicle which was showing its age. I walked to the side of the road and the driver stopped a few metres away. He was a bushie, about thirty, I reckoned.

'G'day,' he said. 'Got enough water?'

I advanced on him, arms still flailing, but declined the offer saying I had more than enough for the couple of days into Hawker. He asked about my walk then, apparently taking pity on my fly problem, he said, 'Pretty bad, eh? Have you got a face net?'

Swallowing the temptation to say that if I had a face net I'd be bloody well wearing it, wouldn't I? I said no, I didn't have one, and that I had intended buying one in Quorn but had forgotten. I was glad I did (swallowed the temptation, that is) because without hesitation, he produced a net from the passenger's seat and handed it to me through the window. 'Have this one, mate. I reckon your need is greater than mine.' Then he was gone.

The temperature reached thirty-three degrees but I didn't care, there were no flies. Well, there were flies but they were no longer able to explore my facial orifices. I took grim satisfaction in their mounting frustration as they dived and hovered, trying to find a way through the net.

By 4.30pm I'd had enough and, finding a cleared spot just outside a property gate, I dropped my pack, gathered some firewood and started the billy boiling. Then I unpacked.

My backpack is quite orderly. The food bag is on top and everything is in bags within bags. The outer bag is a spare sleeping bag 'stuff-sack' in which I keep individual things in zip-lock sandwich bags. My radio and antenna wire with its cord attachment, along with the microphone and power cable, are wrapped in my towel, deep in the backpack. The 12 volt battery pack is in my bum bag which I carry in front where it is connected to the solar panel. Further down in the bag is the tent outer and inner, groundsheet, tent poles and a small bag of tent pegs. At the bottom are my two cordial bottles filled with water. As each one empties it is transferred outside the pack to make more room within. In this way I am able to carry up to three two-litre bottles of water and another 600ml container in a side pocket. I was also carrying two 750ml coffee milk containers in my belly bag.

Having unpacked, I laid out the groundsheet as protection against stones, twigs and the inevitable double-gees, and spread the tent inner over it. The frame is all one assembly with about ten sections of aluminium tubing, all tied together with elastic string. It quickly assembles into an igloo-shaped framework with three legs which fit into inner strap eyelets, springing the legs outwards. It's a beautifully simple design – I never tire of erecting or packing it.

The tent has a zippered front 'entrance' which, when closed, will keep out insects and, hopefully, small snakes. Once the tent is up I throw the bright orange outer over the frame and secure it at ground level to three points at the base of the legs, where the inner tent has a plastic clip at each corner. This outer is waterproof which is just as well because it has so far been dripping wet every morning from dew. The outer extends a metre or so, creating a 'verandah' where I keep my night drinking bottle and boots.

It sounds a long process but my billy had barely boiled before the tent was up and ready for occupation.

I now dug into my food sack for a packet of noodles. My favourite is spicy Thai. Mixed with a Cup-a-Soup (hearty beef, vegetable or chicken) as a thickener, it makes a satisfying meal.

With dinner simmering in the billy I carried my radio across to a tree I had chosen to support the antenna line. I tied one end of my venetian cord to a rock and the other end to the antenna line. I hurled the rock over a low branch and pulled the antenna aloft with the cord. With the antenna and batteries connected to the radio, I returned to my campfire for dinner.

My evening meal was delicious, my radio sched hopeless. I could again hear lots of snippets of ham conversation but my calls to Bill and Roger went unanswered. The good news was that the batteries were holding up; at least I'd solved that problem.

Disappointed, I did the washing up – one billy and a spoon – and drank the washing up water. The flavour was a mild something-or-other.

All in all it had been a good day. I'd covered more than twenty kilometres, I had a new face net and the solar panel was working. As for my glasses – well, I could always read my map with one eye closed. Better than that, I found that I could use my loose lens as a monocle. 'Count von Johnson,' I thought. 'I just need a dueling scar.'

I settled in with my transistor radio tuned to the ABC's local AM station in Adelaide. Peter Goers was prattling on as usual. I used to be a bit put off by his on-air manner but he had grown on me and I'd started looking forward to his program. On this night he was talking about the outback. This perked me up and, thinking publicity, I telephoned Janne Bidenko, suggesting she call the station and tell Peter that I was listening to him. Perhaps he might send me a 'cheerio'. I was drifting in and out of sleep when, much later, I heard Peter interviewing her. 'Keep in touch and let us know how your walker is going,' he said.

Excellent – fund raising of this nature depends largely on publicity. I fell asleep, probably with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER 7

Besieged by bikes

11 – 19 April, days 7 – 15

(14km SW Hawker – Lat: 31:59.283 Long: 138:21.717)

Having talked to Roger about my radio's poor performance I decided that I needed to build a new antenna. Any long line antenna such as the one I'm carrying needs a very good earth connection, and I'm never going to find one in country that has been baking in a hundred-year drought. Bone dry ground is a poor conductor. However, Roger had promised to post me a ferrite core, some wire and instructions to build a portable di-pole antenna to operate on the 40 meters band. This should improve my voice transmission and reduce background noise when receiving.

I had noticed while packing up that the stitching in the ground mat stuff-sack was unravelling so badly the end was just hanging on. There were also small problems with two other pieces of equipment.

It looked as though I was going to need a couple of lay-days in Hawker to sort things out, which was no problem – I had always regarded this first week as a learning curve.

Knowing from last night's weather reports that today would be hot, I was up even earlier than usual and had finished packing well before sunrise. My thermometer told me that it was already twenty degrees, yet it was only 6.15am.

I had not been walking long – the sun had still not risen – when I heard a car approaching from behind. It was Graham, the bloke I'd met in Quorn who was riding the Mawson Trail on a bike. Recognising me, he pulled over and told me his sad story.

It had been his intention to spend several days riding and camping along the trail but by lunch time on his first day, he'd had no less than six punctures. Thoroughly discouraged, he'd walked his bike back to the caravan park and was

now heading for Wilpena for more cycling, hopefully on tracks with fewer sharp objects. I commiserated with him but after he drove off I again congratulated myself on my decision to walk rather than cycle.

Much later in the day I reached the outskirts of Gordon, a ghost town originally surveyed in 1880. It had been a busy place in its day, now there was just blowing dust, crumbling walls and lots of memories. The school was closed in 1928 which gives some idea of how long it's been since anything happened in Gordon.

There are many such places in this part of the world. Early pioneers had arrived in Gordon in their thousands, taking up cheap (or free) grazing land in the hope of making a living, perhaps a fortune. Then the railway arrived. *Four hours to Port Augusta for a weekend of shopping and drinking!* There was mining as well. Hopes were high but the land was dry and unforgiving. Stout hearts were broken and the people drifted away to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

I walked down the main street, a solitary figure, the only sound the sigh of the wind and my own footsteps. Half-demolished walls stood as silent reminders of a long-gone era. Yet, in my imagination, I heard children shouting and playing in the schoolyard. Was that a bell ringing, summoning them inside? And that old pub over there … did I hear the clinking of glass? Or was it a tune being belted out on a piano?

'G'DAY'

I spun around, startled.

I'd been so engrossed in my imaginings I had not heard them. Cyclists, lycra-clad cyclists, one in front followed by two others, then more behind them. It was an invasion.

'Heard you were up ahead,' said the bloke who'd made me jump. 'How are you finding the heat?'

Recovering some composure I said I hadn't really noticed it. 'I was just wandering around here trying to imagine what it would have been like in the old days,' I said. 'But now you mention it, yeah it's warming up all right. What are you guys up to?'

'We're on a thirty-day cycle. Gulf to gulf,' he said.

I think my jaw must have dropped. 'Are you the group who rode through here last year?'

'Sort of. Same company running the ride but none of us was on last year's trip.'

I could scarcely believe it. This was the same ride that I'd heard a grandmother describing when I was at Allan Creek. This was the ride that had inspired me to walk across Australia.

I was still standing there open-mouthed when even more riders arrived. There were men and women, young ones and old ones, thin ones and fat ones who looked as though they would rather be elsewhere. Easing themselves from their saddles they stretched their backs and began pulling at their lycra.

Cameras were dragged out of panniers, photographs were taken, yarns were swapped. I found myself re-telling my story to what appeared to be successive waves of cyclists.

Then it was all over and they were back on their bikes and pedalling away. As they disappeared from view, Gordon returned to its sleepy self, the only evidence of the cyclists' passing, their thin tyre tracks and scuff marks in the dirt.

Now that I had the countryside to myself again I took a sip of water, hoisted the pack and resumed my journey through the ghost town and on towards Hawker. I had just settled into my walk when another car passed me from behind, continued a hundred metres and stopped. As I came closer the driver's door opened and an unfit-looking bloke of about forty climbed out and looked around. Then the front passenger door opened. This was a smaller, younger man carrying something in each hand. Now what? I thought.

As they crossed the road towards me I saw that the younger man had a microphone in one hand and a tape recorder over his shoulder. I'm not normally slow on the uptake but I have to admit that I was puzzled.

'What are you here for?' I asked.

The young man replied in an unmistakable French accent. 'I am 'ere for you, *monsieur*. I am a journalist. May I interview please?'

I still didn't get it. I'd received a little publicity but a media crew from France?

'Forty-odd' introduced himself as Peter Solley, CEO of OutBike, the company sponsoring the cyclists. The French journalist was travelling with the group making a documentary called 'Follow Your Dream' which would be released in France. He had apparently decided that an interview with me would fit nicely with his story.

I could understand people regarding a *cycling* trip across Australia as the realisation of a dream but I had to admit that it had never been a dream of mine to *walk* across. I told him I was just a bloke who liked the outback and when the idea came to me, I did it.

He wilted visibly but, pulling himself together, he produced a tape recorder and began the interview. The poor fellow was willing me to say that I was 'following my dream'. I resisted for a while but eventually thought, 'Oh, what the hell,' and with some embarrassment, I gave him the magic words.

My little piece of Shangri-la on Allan Creek, near Beaudesert in Queensland. I was comfortably ensconced here when a radio broadcast started me thinking about walking across Australia.

I take my first step from Spencer Gulf in South Australia to the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory, a distance of about 2500 kilometres.

The majesty of a red river gum encapsulates the soul of inland Australia.

Quorn Caravan Park where I took refuge after being attacked by hoons.

'I'm following my dream,' I said gazing wistfully at the horizon.

My interviewer beamed. *'Magnifique,'* he said. 'Per'aps you weel say eet again, no?'

Emboldened I took a deep breath, eye-balled the horizon again and breathed: 'I planned for nearly a year but finally I got to follow my dream.'

*

I came to Wilson, another ghost town even older than Gordon. This place was proclaimed in 1881, the catalyst being some good seasons in the 1870s. It was assumed the seasons would continue; thirty centimetres rainfall a year had been the forecast. Of course, it didn't happen. When I looked around the crumbling ruins and across to the dry, blowing dust it looked as though there hadn't been a drop since the golden years of the 1870s. There was no natural water supply either. I couldn't help admiring the fortitude of those early settlers. Year after year the wheat would have been sown and year after year the hot wind would have shriveled the young shoots or blown the seed away even before it took root. Fields of wheat! There was barely enough rain to support the thorny scrub. Yet they had persevered and it was 1954 before the last settler left. Then the wind and the sun began their slow reclamation of the semi-desert. One day there would be nothing left of Wilson at all.

Four opera singers perform at Rawnsley Park, with the magnificent Wilpena Pound hills forming a dramatic backdrop.

The country now began to change. The endless plains of low shrub gradually gave way to the more interesting Black Jack Range to the east and the Yourambulla Range to the north-west.

I set up camp that evening about fourteen kilometres south of Hawker, leaving an easy walk the following day. My evening meal was beef noodles and vegetable soup followed, as a special treat, by a cup of coffee. I made no attempt to use my radio because I was now getting a strong signal from Hawker and was able to ring Bill on my cell phone.

There was a brilliant sunset that night. I watched it as I sat alongside my campfire, thinking what a wonderful place the Australian bush could be – wonderful yet utterly heartbreaking. I thought of those early settlers in Gordon and Wilson and of how they must have suffered. It was tranquil by my campfire but in a few hours, when the sun blazed again, there would be revealed a country in which only the strong survived.

*

For breakfast I had a glass of banana Quik in powdered milk. It sounds a bit 'light-on' but I had been eating well and with Hawker almost within cooee I felt it was all I needed. I was away by 7.15am but it was already twenty-two

Storm clouds gather over North Blinman.

degrees and it was obviously going to get a lot hotter as the day progressed.

Although there were hills to the east and west, the bitumen road remained level. I hadn't checked my map to see where the bitumen gave way to gravel, mainly I guess, because it didn't make much difference when you were walking. However, I was expecting some sand – and that's a different kettle of fish.

I'd been walking about ninety minutes when I came to a sign which said: *Antiques and Collectibles. Turn left 500 metres*.

Signs like this assume considerable importance when you are in the bush; they demand investigation. I was intrigued because I half-remembered Bill mentioning the place some years earlier. Unable to resist, I turned left on to some little-used tyre tracks, eventually arriving at a house with a shed at the

This trig point on Wirrealpa Station can be seen from kilometres away. The homestead is in the background.

rear which was the office – a sign said so.

I pulled off my pack, sat on a bench and, squinting against the sun, ran my eyes over the collection of antique machinery and household goods scattered around the yard. I marvelled at the ingenuity of the early settlers who had made this stuff and used it in their daily lives.

After a while I yelled out, *'Anybody home?'* My voice was lost in the great emptiness. A small dog yapped a warning from a safe distance but it was the only sign of life. I guessed the owner was in Hawker or maybe Quorn. I waited about thirty minutes and when nobody turned up I hoisted my pack on to my back and backtracked to the bitumen.

I was within a few kilometres of Hawker when I came across a gang cleaning up the road shoulders and doing some general upkeep. I think they

An aerial view of mountains near Wirrealpa Station. I was just as impressed by their rugged beauty as were the station's Asian visitors who were flown over the area in a Cessna.

were more surprised to see me than I was them. It was good to talk to somebody but the men were spread out over a kilometre, so repeating my story to each group proved time consuming. There were graders, tip trucks and a water truck. Every driver either leaned through the window to shout a greeting, or climbed down to the road to shake my hand and offer me water.

The road turned hard left revealing Hawker and some tall radio masts in the distance. It wasn't a big town, in fact I could see right through it. I came to the heavy and light industrial area first and was surprised to see a well set-up engineering workshop and some large, freshly painted transformers on pallets. This was of interest to me as I knew I would want some engineering facilities to make a more sophisticated balun for my new-look antenna.

Hawker was even smaller than Quorn, however, there was a hospital, post office, police station and, of course, a general store with some tables outside.

There were a few people around, all obviously curious about the strange looking figure with the solar panel on his chest. I felt decidedly self-conscious; it would take me a while to become accustomed to this undisguised curiosity.

Under watchful eyes I crossed the road and stepped across unusually deep culverts to the general store – the town is flat and it doesn't rain much but when it does, look out!

I took off the solar panel and belly bag, undid the waist and chest straps, slid the pack off and leaned it against the store wall. I wasn't feeling all that hungry but I thought I'd better eat some real food while it was available.

The first thing I saw inside the well set-out store was the fridge with coffee milk, my favourite these days. I grabbed one and seeing a queue at the single checkout, I dug into the freezer for an ice block. I went back outside and had just started on it when a bloke sat down beside me.

'Is that a solar panel?' he asked

I checked him out before answering because his accent and pale complexion suggested recently arrived Pom, or maybe a tourist who'd missed a turnoff in Adelaide.

After confirming at least half of my suspicions (he was British to the core), I said, 'Yup, I love it. Light and flexible and it looks after all my batteries.'

He asked so many questions I started to tell him the whole story. I was half way through when he said, 'I say, are you going to be here long?'

'Well, at least until I've got some tucker.'

'Jolly good. Be right back.'

I went back into the shop and found a knob of polish sausage, three tomatoes and a kilo of grapes. As I was paying for them the guy behind the cash register said, 'You got a write-up in *The Advertiser* a few days ago. Did you

see it?'

I'd forgotten about the promised picture story. I said, 'No, do you have it around?'

He said he would have a look when he 'got a break', and I headed back to the outside table to get stuck into my cold goods.

I was half way through my repast when the Pommie came back with two pale mates. All three were dressed as for a fox hunt. The original bloke was giving a lousy imitation of an Aussie walking in from the desert with a solar panel round his neck. They were good blokes but they talked for nearly two hours.

I had called Bill on the way into town and he had told me that Janne had phoned the caravan park, 'the one out of town', and that I was booked in. The charges would be waived for a few nights' stay, he said.

The bloke in the store told me that it was the right decision as 'the other' caravan park was not a scratch on the one out on Carpenter Road, where I was booked in.

'It's just down the road', he said, and I wondered if that was 'just down the road' by car or on foot. 'Oh, and I found the paper with your picture. You can have it if you like, we've all read it.'

I read it outside. It was a good picture and the article was well written, covering the distance of the walk and the fact that I was raising awareness and funds for the DeafBlind Association.

After hitching on the pack and settling the solar panel into place I headed north-west along Craddock Road, parallel to the main road and in the general direction of the 'out of town' caravan park.

I came to the Hawker Hotel and decided to go in. It was a big decision because I'd taken the pledge in Broome twenty-five years ago, and I'd hardly been inside a pub since. But I knew that if I was going to raise funds I needed to show my face

I walked into the cool interior still wearing the pack, empty water bottles swinging on the sides, and my ground mat strapped across the bottom. It was a typical small country pub bar in which hospitality is pretty well guaranteed, but I was surprised to hear somebody call out: '*Been waitin' for you.*'

I finished my visual tour of the bar before finding the voice. He was huge. He had to be the publican – he was sitting on a bar stool with a small beer at hand, drinking with a city-looking fella in his thirties who I judged to be a brewery salesman. They were the only two in the bar.

'Whadya mean, "waitin' for me?"' I said.

He was enjoying the moment at my expense and in no hurry to satisfy

my curiosity. I took an immediate liking to him.

He took a pull at his beer, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and set the glass down on the bar. Then he raised his eyes and, half grinning, said, 'I saw you walkin' along the road a few days back.'

Fair enough, but it didn't explain why he was waiting for me. I nodded as though satisfied. Better play the game, I thought.

'Best you get that pack off and have a beer,' he advised and, pointing to a corner of the bar, 'put it over there, then I'll fill you in.'

I did as he suggested though I couldn't see that it mattered where I dropped my pack – there were only the three of us in the bar and I didn't get the impression he was expecting bus loads of tourists.

He went behind the bar and was about to pour a beer when I stopped him, explaining that I was on the wagon. 'I'd appreciate a Solo,' I said.

It was cold and wet and fizzy and it was just what I wanted.

'Anytime I see someone walkin' or ridin' a bike, headin' up this way, I know they'll always end up in here,' he explained at last.

Except the ones that don't, I thought to myself.

He pushed out a huge hand. 'John Starling, your host,' he announced, 'and this is Jarrad, my bean counter. He's up from the big smoke. We're sorting out some accounting stuff.'

I stayed for an hour. We told story for story and joke for joke, they drinking beers and me sinking Solos to the point of internal explosion. It was 4.30pm before I saddled up and received directions for the Flinders Ranges Caravan Park. I promised to return after I'd settled in, saying that I would join them for dinner. 'On me, mate,' said John.

That settled it.

'And don't be shy about rattlin' a tin,' he yelled as I squeezed through the door into the street. 'Should be a bit of a crowd around here tonight.'

I backtracked to the post office where I posted the ablution block key back to Gary at Quorn. While there, I noticed one of the customers had a badge on her blouse – obviously a school teacher. I introduced myself and asked if the school would be interested in me giving a talk to the kids tomorrow. Her eyes fair lit up.

'Too right!' she said. 'About 9.30, okay?'

'Yeah, sure.'

I wrote down her name and made a mental note to find out where the school was and to be there early.

I booked in at the caravan park through John and Corrie Sitters who were expecting me after the phone call from Janne. Then I showered and set up the

tent near the camp kitchen.

I spoke to Bill and Roger and changed the arrangements slightly for the next few days' radio scheds, explaining that I would be erecting a pretty good semi-permanent antenna to do some experimenting. I then gathered up everything except the tent, put on my full gear and walked back to the pub in semi-darkness. I wanted to be in 'full battle dress' while rattling the tin, though it would have been nice to put on shorts, shirt and thongs and have the night off.

John bought my dinner – hamburger and chips – and he kept the Solos coming all night. There was a good crowd and the tin rattling was very successful. I say, 'tin rattling' though in the absence of a tin, I simply left my up-turned floppy hat on the bar where I was sitting with John. Word quietly spread around the bar and every fifteen minutes or so there'd be another clink of a coin or a rustle of bank notes, followed by a 'thanks mate' from me.

It was just as well I was on Solo because the way John was dishing out the rounds I would have had to be carried to the caravan park if I had been drinking anything stronger. As it was, I found my way back with my wind-up torch and would have slept like a log if it hadn't been for numerous trips to the loo, courtesy of Solo.

What a journey this is turning out to be. I had thought that after the excitement of planning and preparing, the rest would just be tedious months of hard slog until I reached the other end. I couldn't have been more wrong. Every day was getting better.

*

It was Friday the thirteenth, a fact that became increasing obvious as the day wore on. Friday 13 April 2007.

Mindful of the promised breakfast at the pub, and with mouth awash at the prospect, I set off from the caravan park as early as was decently possible and set course for the Hawker Hotel. Big John had suggested 7am and I had no intention of keeping him waiting.

My pace was bordering on brisk as I contemplated the previous night. Some night! Every blow-in had been dragged over and introduced to me – I'd lost track of how many times I'd told my story. More bush yarns were traded than I could remember and, of course, the later it got the more preposterous the stories became. You tend to notice this when you're on Solo. There are some great raconteurs in Australia but none better than the dinky-di bushie when he is high on the booze.

It had transpired during the course of the evening that twenty-six empty coal cars had been derailed on the Leigh Creek line. It was agreed that Big John,

Jarrad the bean counter and I would drive out to the scene of the carnage this morning to inspect the damage. Precisely what we would be doing, looking for, or hoped to gain from such an expedition was not discussed.

It promised to be a very good day: a country breakfast, a train derailment and a talk to the local school kids.

As I closed in on the hotel my thoughts turned to the promised breakfast. There would be fried eggs for sure – you always get fried eggs in a country pub. And there would be bacon, that was more or less a given. Fried tomatoes? – perhaps. Mushrooms? – you never know. Toast and marmalade? There'd have to be toast and marmalade.

The warning bells began ringing the moment I entered the pub. There was no sign of Big John, and the bean counter was nowhere to be seen. I wandered through the back calling out 'Hello' but it was as empty as a Pharaoh's tomb, and with half the atmosphere. I poked my head into the kitchen, sniffing expectantly, but there was no cook and no tantalising smell of sizzling bacon. I eventually found one or two staff but they were the day shift and didn't know me from a bar of soap.

I explained, I suspect somewhat lamely, that I had been there last night and that I was walking across Australia raising funds for charity, and that the boss had invited me for breakfast. It's at times like this that you become conscious of your dishevelled appearance and your ten-day beard. You look like a bum who is trying to con a free breakfast.

The hotel's day staff certainly got that impression because some knowing looks were exchanged and it was explained – ever so politely – that they were unaware of the arrangement. However, one woman took pity on me. 'How about a cup of coffee while you wait?' she asked.

Sighing heavily I unharnessed and settled for a coffee … and waited … and waited.

I would discover later that the previous night's roistering had continued until 3am. As a result it was midday before Big John stumbled into the new day, and much, much later when the bean counter emerged clutching his head, and wishing he were anywhere but Hawker. I missed out on breakfast.

The expedition to the derailment was also struck off the morning's agenda – no publican, no bean counter, no inspection of twenty-six derailed coal cars.

It was now 9am and I was due at the school in half-an-hour. That at least would be a goer. Schools love it when outsiders drop in with something interesting and educational to share with the kids for an hour or two.

Heaving on the pack and adjusting the solar panel, I left the hotel and

turned into the main street past the shop where I'd had lunch. I followed the school signs past the town's 'other' caravan park (it looked okay to me) until I came to the school with its brightly painted playground equipment.

As I was a bit early I went into the library and asked about Internet access. The staff said that it was available but only for limited hours. I said I would be back later.

Finding my way to 'Administration' I squeezed through the front door to where a receptionist was attending to her nails. She looked up, ran her eyes over me and appeared to come to the conclusion that I was a recently-arrived extraterrestrial.

'I think you've come to the wrong place,' she said nervously, and she glanced outside as if expecting to see my spaceship in the car park.

Thinking it best to prove that I was an Earthling, I said, 'Hi.'

This appeared to calm her, however, she now turned suspicious. I could read her mind: *Backpacker … get rid of him … send him down town.*

I persevered. 'My name is Jeff Johnson,' I said. 'I made an arrangement with one of your teachers to be here this morning to give a talk to the students about my walk up through the centre of Australia.'

Her eyes now widened.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but I don't remember the teacher's name. I … er, I met her at the post office and offered to come here this morning.'

Still no positive reaction.

I shuffled a bit and was about to try a new tack when the teacher entered the office. Expressions of part recognition then guilt crossed her face in rapid succession.

Crossing to the desk, she said, 'I'm terribly sorry, I forgot. Hang on, I'll just get the headmistress.'

The headmistress listened carefully while I went through the story again, all the while fielding questions from various people who popped their heads around the corner for a squiz at the alien.

The end message, delivered with profound regret and many apologies, was that it was the Friday before the start of school holidays … all the students had been organised into activities … they were scattered all over the place … very, very sorry, but …

I got the bum's rush, but I could understand. Running a school is a complex business so having somebody drop in unexpectedly can be disruptive. Swallowing my disappointment, I left them the DeafBlind's web address and headed back to the pub.

As there was still no sign of Big John and the bean counter I trekked

back to the caravan park and counted last night's donations – $102.75. I was amazed – $102.75 and all I'd done was sit at the bar alongside an upturned hat. I wished I wasn't so self-conscious about walking up to strangers and asking for donations. If I'd had it in me to do that, I would have collected heaps more.

Having missed out on breakfast I decided to have brunch: a glass of powdered milk with my favourite banana Qwik flavouring.

As the solar panel was now working okay with the makeshift repair 'G' clamp doing its job, I headed back into town with the solar panel and my camera, but without the backpack.

The bullet connectors on the solar panel that plug into my battery pack were in need of re-soldering and I wanted to have a look around the engineering shops I'd seen on the way into town to see if they had the equipment.

From the caravan park to the centre of town is a short walk of 1.7 kilometres, and I was settling into a routine of going a different way each time. Today I went via the old railway station which had been converted into a restaurant – the sound of a train whistle had not been heard there since 1970 when the last loco departed.

Hawker was established in 1881. The rail opened the same year with a thriving hinterland providing passengers, wheat, wool and stock. But several serious drought years again wiped out the grain growers. Today the district is officially described as semi-arid, a fair assessment because as far as I could see, nothing much would grow there.

My first chore was to head for the post office for mail. I was expecting a parcel from Bill with the 240V plug pack, a parcel from Roger with bits to make the new aerial, maybe a sat phone from Janne and my new glasses – I was still one-eyed.

I was recognised in the post office (nice to be a semi-celebrity) but there was nothing for me which was no real disappointment; the parcels would only just have been posted.

I walked to the light industrial area, to the only likely-looking place that was open and asked if there was any chance of borrowing a small soldering iron to fix the connectors on my solar panel. They were friendly people but they had nothing small enough to do the job. They suggested I try one of the two service stations in town.

I went to the smaller of the two which sported a bowser on the path, a miniscule shop with a selection of spare parts, and a multiple bay workshop out the back which looked well used. Encouraged, I stood outside one of the work bays where a couple of blokes in overalls were working under the bonnet of a four-wheel-drive. I waited for several minutes not wanting to break their

concentration. They eventually emerged from the engine compartment and saw me but showed no sign of coming over to see if I needed help.

Sighing quietly to myself I walked over with the solar panel in hand. 'Excuse me.'

They looked round but there was no greeting so, showing them the wire leading from the solar panel, I said, 'I wondered if I could borrow a small soldering iron to do this, please?'

'Yeah. No worries, be with you in a minute,' said one of them.

Relieved, I retreated outside the workshop area and stood back where I was out of their way. After five minutes I sat down in the parking area with my back resting against the wall and waited for a 'country' minute. Twenty minutes later I again interrupted them.

'How about I come back later when you're not so busy?'

The boss, the spokesman and the older of the two, said unenthusiastically, 'Yeah, okay.'

Friday the thirteenth!

I returned to the pub which was now open. Not only open – Big John had surfaced and was doing a stocktake. I asked him if this was the time of year for it.

'No, mate. Do it every day,' he said.

I thought he was being funny but he was serious. He explained that everything was laid out so that he knew what was in each row and how many items were on each shelf. He mumbled something about casual staff and changed the subject. He was looking surprisingly fresh-faced, though he admitted not feeling the best. He said he thought it would be a while before the bean counter made his appearance and advised speaking softly when he did.

'Sorry about the breakfast,' he said. 'I'll make it up to you later. That trip to the derailment will have to wait as well.'

I wandered over to the BP service station which was also the town's information centre.

'Are there any radio hams in town?' I asked.

'Yeah,' said the attendant.

At last, I thought. My luck has changed.

'Yeah, there used to be. He left a few years ago.'

I crossed the road to the service station and its unenthusiastic staff, and came straight to the point. No point being polite and waiting, I thought. 'About the soldering iron,' I said, but I got no further.

'Look, we're a bit busy right now,' said the boss.

'Okay, I have other things to catch up on. I'll drop back again later.' I was getting a bad feeling about this place.

Back at the caravan park I settled into the camp kitchen and made a few repairs to my kit. The first job was the stitching on the end panels of the stuff-sack for the ground mat, which was now seriously unravelled. Fortunately I had included a reel of cotton and a sewing needle in my first aid kit in case I had to stitch a wound. My 'belly bag' was also coming undone allowing small items like my pen and thermometer to slip through. I'm no seamstress, but I was pretty pleased with the result. Mind you, I had to go over the bad bits several times and the thin, synthetic material did not mend easily. However, I'm proud to say that my 'temporary' repairs lasted the next four months whereas the original factory-sewn seams had chucked it in after a couple of weeks.

When I powered up the amateur radio that night I was excited to hear Roger's Morse code among the background noise. Unfortunately, I was unable to identify anything other than his call sign: *dah-did-dit-dit dah-dit dah-dah-dit-dah*. I tried transmitting but I made a mistake with my call sign. I gave up on the Morse after that.

I talked to Bill and Roger on the cell phone and SMS, sorted out the few things I needed and headed back to the pub for dinner and to show the flag. There was another $30 in walk-up donations but it was too noisy for me. There was a footy match going full bore on the telly, the crowd was rowdy – and I'd had a hard day at the office.

And it was Friday the thirteenth.

*

I slept in. This is what happens when the lone traveller drops anchor for a while.

I had been in Hawker only three nights and it was 7am before I poked my head through my tent fly. Maybe it was the prospect of what lay ahead: women's business. Today was laundry day and I had decided that I would wash everything, whether it was dirty or not. The facilities were there, so why not use them?

I normally wash my socks and jocks in the shower but today I would retreat into the laundry, do a *proper* wash, freshen everything up …. cleanliness, I reminded myself, is next to godliness.

When I say I intended washing 'everything' I suppose I should be honest and admit that there wasn't exactly a mountain of laundry. There was a sports towel (60 centimetres by 40 centimetres), three T-shirts, a pair of shorts, a 'walking' shirt and a 'town' shirt Then there were seven pairs of socks and jocks and a floppy hat and … well, that was about it.

I began pulling things out in readiness for the big suds-up. The towel had been a going away present; it was important to keep it clean because I kept it wrapped round my radio transceiver. The T-shirts bore the DeafBlind logo on the front and the finger-spelling alphabet on the back. My khaki walking shirt, also a present, had many pockets, while my short-sleeve town shirt was light weight and open neck.

I knew the Flinders Ranges Caravan Park was top drawer but the laundry was above and beyond. Everything was spotlessly clean. There was a laundry trolley complete with basket for me to take my washed and spun-dry clothes to the Hills Hoist, and hanging from the line was a bag of pegs. And, get this: *in the gent's ablutions there were doilies under the soap dispensers*. I felt as though I were in the Dorchester; bushies are not accustomed to such luxury. Doilies! Peg bags! What next?

The whole 4½-star caravan park was a tribute to the Sitters who ran it like clockwork. The kitchen boasted a stove, two fridges, electric jug and toaster, microwave oven, barbecue, a cupboard full of pots and pans, cooking and eating utensils – everything anybody could need. There was a fly-proof room with another table, chairs and television. A tank of drinking water (run-off from the kitchen roof) was claimed by John Sitter to have never run dry. This was some caravan park.

In these pristine surrounds I completed my laundry chores in a glow of goodwill and, leaving my smalls fluttering gently in the warm westerly, I set off once again for the post office.

Success. I wasn't even asked to identify myself. Bill's parcel was handed to me as though I were a town identity, known to be waiting for just such a delivery. I opened it on the post office steps like a kid ripping into a Christmas present. It was from Bill and it contained my new glasses and the 240V plug pack. I put the glasses on immediately. The frames were comfortable and I could see without squinting.

Riding the wave in my change of fortune I decided to return to the service station in the hope that they would produce the small soldering iron. No such luck. Their lack of a small soldering iron was matched only by their lack of interest in the matter. Determined not to let this minor setback spoil my mood, I returned to the caravan park to see if John Sitter could help.

On the way, I called in at the general store where I stocked up with meat, onions, tomatoes, bread, margarine, barbecue sauce, some packets of Continental soup – and an almond Magnum chocolate-coated ice cream. This latter purchase, I convinced myself, was to boost my calorie intake.

I was sitting outside the store slurping into the ice cream when a couple

of tanned, fit-looking Aussies wandered over. 'Saw you here yesterday,' said one of them. 'Are you the fella who's walking through the centre?'

After I had confirmed their suspicion the other one said, 'Was that a solar panel round your neck?'

It transpired that they had been planning a walk over part of the Flinders Ranges for a fair while but had not yet got around to it. I told them of the planning I'd put into my walk and about some of the incidents along the way. I think they were inspired because I left them declaring that they would be starting their own walk sooner rather than later.

Back at the caravan park I was hailed by a grey nomad who was sitting with his wife under the annex of the biggest motor home I had seen. It was huge – a suburban house on wheels. Along one side of the vehicle was a splendid mural of Knobby's Head, at the southern entrance to the Hunter River near Newcastle. I recognised it immediately as Bill lives at Stockton in view of 'Knobby's' and the lighthouse. Stuart (the grey nomad) and his wife were from Stockton. We settled in with some biscuits and a cup of tea and chatted for an hour or so.

It transpired that Stuart's home on wheels also featured a workshop with a very comprehensive set of tools. He was obviously one of those people who can't travel anywhere without his shed. I told him the story of my abortive attempts to borrow a small soldering iron, and, quick as a flash, he dived into his workshop and produced a small soldering iron, some electronic-grade solder and an extension lead. Tossing expressions of gratitude over my shoulder, I high-tailed it back to my tent for the solar panel.

The job took only minutes.

I thanked him again … and again. He had saved my bacon. Not only that, he produced his wallet and flipped out a ten dollar donation for DeafBlind.

It was time to start work on my electronics. I took my newly-acquired 240V plug pack and 12V NiMH rechargeable pack to the camp kitchen where I set the output to 15V. It was a bit high but the next one down was 12V which would not charge into a 12V pack. Bill had included five 1N4004 diodes which have a voltage drop of .75V, so I included two of these diodes in series to give me 13.5 volts which should be perfect for the job. With a couple of clip leads, and the diodes ends twisted, I now had a charger I could use whenever 240 volts was available. While I was at it, I checked with the multi-meter to make sure that the charge rate was not too high.

The next task for the new plug pack would be to charge the internal battery pack in my Yeasu 817 radio. It is nominally 9.6 volts, 1700maH so I set up the plug pack with 12 volt output with one diode in series.

My radio sched that evening was a disaster. I set up the radio at the arranged time and frequency and was quite over the moon when Roger's call sign came through in reasonably clear Morse code. Remember, however, that Roger is highly skilled and experienced in amateur radio whereas I am anything but. The result was that I was unable to take down his message. I tried but, as my diary shows, I did not even come close. I was reading the occasional letter correctly but it was coming in faster than I could interpret. And when I tried to send, I made mistakes. If you have tried correcting a mistake in Morse, you will know what I'm talking about. It can degenerate into a nightmare. In short, I was floundering in an avalanche of dits and dahs. I decided that I had left it a bit late for gaining the skills necessary to communicate in Morse.

Fortunately the cell phone was still in range so I rang Roger with a sheepish apology. Maybe I could get in some practise while I was in Hawker, I suggested.

He said, 'Hmmm.'

*

I had to move my tent. John explained apologetically that he watered the grass every three days and that my little patch was in the area next in line. We were talking about nothing in particular when he let drop that he was interested in amateur radio. I felt my ears prick.

'I er … I don't suppose you would know where I could buy a PL259 co-ax connector?' I asked hopefully. 'I'm making a new antenna.'

'There's no electronics shops in Hawker,' he said. 'In fact we don't even have any resident Telstra techs.'

I described the antenna I intended making. I didn't expect him to follow the technicalities so I was mildly surprised when he said he knew which connector I was looking for. My surprise turned to delight when he added that he might just have one in the shed.

John had a big shed. It was like some of Bill's sheds on his Hunter districts property – full of 'junk'. I was always chiding him about them and his answer was always the same: 'The nearest town is sixty kilometres away; I save every nut and bolt because you never know when you might need them.'

When I looked inside John's shed it struck me that he and Bill would get along very well. John dived into a pile of rubbish in a dark corner and began tossing things over his shoulder: a gutted television set, a bundle of telephone wire, car alternators, a washing machine timer, fluorescent light fittings – you name it.

I watched bemused. It had always been my opinion that collectors of junk tend to go over the top. All very well hanging on to stuff that's useful,

but they reach the point where they never throw anything away. The result is something that look's like Bill's shed … or John's shed.

'Ah, here it is,' said John.

I stared in amazement. Hanging from his fist was nearly four metres of RG58 co-axial cable with a PL259 connector fitted to one end. I recognised it immediately. Somebody had obviously decided it might one day come in handy and it had found its way into John's shed. I couldn't believe it. If I'd had access to an electronics shop I would have bought the cable and connector and joined them – this was already connected!

I said I was sorry for my unkind remarks about his shed, thanked him profusely and headed back to my tent to store away the precious cable and its connector until Roger's parcel arrived with the ferrite core and winding wire.

As it was already lunchtime I headed for the pub and treated myself to a juicy steak and chips – such luxuries would soon be but a dream. It was important to 'build up' when the opportunity was there. I felt like a camel drinking great amounts of water in order to manage without for long periods in the desert.

With a full stomach I decided to do a little light research into Hawker's history. I found a plaque commemorating the early settlers, and was delighted to stumble across a fence straining post outside the old railway station. Today the posts are generally made of wood from the trunk of a large local hardwood tree, debarked and cut so that there is a metre below ground. These straining posts are positioned every hundred to five hundred metres along the fence line, and on the corners or bends. The wire is tied to one strainer post and passed along or through the intermediary and much smaller posts, before being strained or stretched tightly with one of a variety of ingeniously designed strainers. Some of the modern ones are antique in design. The most common comprise two parts hanging loosely on chains and are diabolically difficult to master.

The antique strainer on display in Hawker was of cast steel. It was rusty and was probably made in England from an Australian pioneer design, back in the latter half of the 1800s. It had six individual wire drums of about 7.5 centimetres diameter, each with the shaft extended out of the post, with a 2.5 centimetre square on the end of the shaft. On each drum was a ratchet. When the wire was attached to the drum a removable handle was fitted to the square shaft end. As the handle was turned, the strain in the wire was taken up and the ratchet held in place. Each of the six wire strands were done in turn. Apart from the big cost, this is a far better system than any I have seen or used. But cost was the issue – little wonder that the only remaining examples of this wonderful invention are found rusting in outback displays.

It was, I suppose, an inconsequential find, but I was discovering since starting the walk that I was taking a keen interest in the ingenuity of the early pioneers. Necessity, it is said, is the mother of invention, and it was never more obvious than in the early days of the Australian outback. There seemed no limit to the tools and implements the pioneers developed to help them tame their harsh environment. Only by walking through the country and surviving its challenges could I appreciate what it had been like. The motorist experiences almost nothing of this.

My appreciation was probably heightened by my own experience in a remote region north of Broome called One Arm Point. My job had been to build a cattle yard from scratch, using only local timber. It would have been a tough assignment if there had been an abundance of local timber but, as anybody who knows the area will appreciate, it's not exactly thickly wooded up there. I wasn't over-equipped with the right tools either: a chainsaw too small for the job, and a battered Land Rover were all I had.

Each day I headed out to a stand of black butt trees, selected my tree, felled it, removed its bark and dragged it to a central point. I then cut the forty-six centimetre corner posts, thirty-centimetre general posts and twenty-centimetre rails. I also cut two giant seventy-six centimetre front posts for the ramp, which had to be strong enough to withstand being hit by trucks during loading operations. Every Friday afternoon a bloke arrived with a ten tonne truck, and we winched the posts and rails into the air for loading and transport to where I built the stockyard, digging the postholes by hand in the stony ground.

It had been hard work but I'd had vehicles and a chainsaw – such as it was – and there had been a comfortable little house waiting for me at the end of each day. The early settlers out here would have given their eye teeth for such luxuries. That was why I was becoming increasingly interested in what they had done and, more importantly, how they had done it. It was why I was so taken by that single, unspectacular fence post and the nearby plaque.

My 'neighbours' in the caravan park that night were four young adventurers driving from Melbourne to Darwin through the centre of the country on Stuart Highway. There were two French-Canadians, a German and a Pom – a real League of Nations. They were good company and we spent the evening watching Aussie rules footie on TV. I explained the rules to them, though my only experience with the game was in 1978 when I was unanimously elected president of the West Kimberley Football Association. They were interested to learn how somebody who had never played the game could rise to such a lofty position. (They were probably thinking English Football League or European Cup).

'It happened like this,' I said. 'I was in a bar of the Mangrove Hotel in Broome with a few friends when a bunch of blokes emerged from a meeting, all wearing gloomy expressions.

' "What's up with you blokes?" I inquired.'

' "Looks like we'll have to delay the start of the season," said one.'

' "How come?" I asked.'

' "In fact we might not get going at all," he continued. "We've just had an AGM and we couldn't form a new committee. Nobody was interested in being president."'

Now this was serious stuff. Broome without a football competition! The town had boasted six teams, they were an important part of the community.

' "We can't have that," says I. "Tell you what … how about making me president?"

'Well, you should've seen the smiles break out. A new round of beers was ordered, we all returned to the meeting room – and the West Kimberley Football Association was launched for another year.'

*

I got up next morning in a state of excitement. I was expecting more parcels at the post office – antenna parts from Roger and a memory card for my camera from Bill. Once I got the memory card I could mail him the one I'd been using with a hundred or more photographs on it which would provide him with a good picture of my life on the road and the conditions I was encountering.

I was also hoping for more progress on the satellite phone. There had been a delay in the arrangements and I was anxious to get the matter settled one way or the other. I had mobile phone coverage while I was in Hawker but I knew that after one day's walking I would be out of range until I reached Mt Isa 1800 kilometres away. I did some mental arithmetic: 1800 kilometres and walking twenty-five kilometres a day – seventy-two days of solid walking plus some days lost for stopovers – I needed that sat phone. I had already decided that if I received one I would mail my cell phone and the 240-volt and 12-volt chargers back to Bill. No point in carrying dead weight.

After another long chat with the League of Nations people, who were about to pull out, I took the short cut across an area of bare ground to the post office. It was still a thirty-minute walk. I was back sitting on the steps waiting for it to open at 9am when the post mistress emerged carrying two cartons of freshly baked bread, and disappeared around the corner. She told me later that she was the agent for an out-of-town bakery which dropped the bread off for her to distribute around town, before opening the post office. Patience is called for in the country.

When she finally opened for business I was well rewarded with two parcels. Back outside, I tore them open. Relief: there was the ferrite core and wire to make the balun from Roger, and the camera memory card from Bill.

At the caravan park I laid out all my electronic gear on the camp kitchen table and started work on the balun.

The balun's ferrite core is made of iron ore dust and 'glue' mixed, compressed and dried into the shape of a doughnut, or in this case, a cotton reel. It has an outside diameter of about 25mm, a 15mm diameter hole through the middle, and an overall length of 35mm.

Three wires are fed through, then around and back through again about ten times. The six wire-ends are then connected in such a way that the 'coax' feeder from the radio passes electrical energy into the ferrite core, which then magnetically passes the energy to the antenna wires. This transfer of energy is 'transformed' by the balun so that there is little or no energy loss. This is necessary otherwise the coax cable from the radio would not 'match' the di-pole antenna without the balun.

Roger's parcel included a diagram showing me how to finalise the connections.

I tied the wound balun to the coaxial cable with venetian cord for support. The wires at this stage were twisted rather than soldered as I no longer had access to a soldering iron.

The two wires that make up the di-pole antenna were now tied to the two extended ends of the cord holding the balun, to allow the balun to suspend on wires between trees. Two short wires from the balun were left sticking out to be connected to alligator clips permanently attached to the di-pole wires when I erected the antenna each evening.

I set up the radio with the new antenna and tried it on low power. This was important with a new antenna as a bad mismatch between the transmitter and the antenna could damage the transmitter. Low power is always prudent when starting.

I began with the receiver and had a listen on the 40 metres band, starting at 7MHz and sweeping quickly through to 7.1MHz. There was an immediate improvement in reception compared with the long line antenna. There were 'voices' on quite a few frequencies and reception was very strong and clear on several others. The balun was a 'goer'. Transmitting, however, was a different story.

The transmitter has a built-in standing wave ratio (SWR) meter which displays the 'match' between the transmitter and the antenna while transmitting a signal.

On this display, a number of bars are shown. If all five bars are displayed, it is a bad match – the SWR is too high. No bars or one bar is desirable. When I pressed the transmit button mine was showing five bars.

I'm afraid I have to admit to being pretty slack when I made up the dipole wires after making the balun. I think I was excited by the progress I was making. As a result I measured out one wire by roughly pacing out the distance and 'adding a bit' for trimming back.

For the second wire I simply used the piece of wire that I had previously employed for the long line. It didn't take me long to wake up to where the problem was but I put off making the necessary changes as the antenna was now down and I was rushing to prepare for a live, on air ABC radio interview.

*

In spite of my advanced age and my experience in business and private life, I am always uncomfortable when being interviewed or standing in front of a microphone. I've 'held office' in a number of organisations – usually president (a) because I'm confident in making decisions and (b) because the president usually has less work to do than the secretary or treasurer. You'd imagine that this would have better prepared me for public speaking, but it hasn't. Maybe it's because in small clubs you are dealing mostly with friends and acquaintances.

The ABC interview had more or less come out of the blue. I had been engrossed in making the balun when I received two phone calls, one from a woman called Anne, the producer of 'Drive' for Brisbane ABC local radio 612. (This was the station I had been listening to when I first heard of the cyclists riding across Australia). The call was not exactly a surprise as I had previously contacted Janne about the poor media coverage of the charity side of my walk. This was now to be rectified: I was to be interviewed at 2.30pm.

I was still working myself into a lather over this development when the second call came in, this one from regional ABC in Townsville which covers northern Queensland. They had heard about me from Anne in Brisbane and they wanted an interview as well. It was agreed that I would be available for their's at 4.45pm. Did this constitute media frenzy, I wondered?

Nervously, I made some notes of topics I had to mention such as contact numbers and a few basic statistics concerning the walk. Fifteen minutes before the agreed time I was ready and waiting.

Anne called at exactly 2.30pm. 'You'll be on air in a minute,' she said.

I think I managed to get through the questions without making an idiot of myself, but when the interview finished five minutes later I realised that I had not so much as glanced at my notes. I had been led by the interviewer who asked me how I came by the idea, where I had started the walk, where I'd been

and so on. The lesson was that if there were things I wanted to get across on radio, I needed to talk with the producer beforehand.

There was no such 'pre-briefing' for the second interview with Nicole Dwyer, for the Townsville regional centre, but I was more relaxed and I felt I got my message across better.

When I telephoned Janne and told her about the interviews she gave me the welcome news that final details for the sat phone had been made and that it should be on its way to me from Perth within twenty-four hours.

My new neighbours in the caravan park that night were a Dutch couple grey-nomading it to the interior. Jan, the husband, was a retired taster for Heineken beer. I reckoned he could have auctioned that job off in Australia and cruised the interior in a luxury mobile home from the proceeds.

*

It was 16 April 2007 and I was looking forward to the day.

Everything was good about today – warm weather, agreeable neighbours, no shortage of carbohydrates … and my big breakthrough.

I had borrowed John's tape measure and cut the di-pole wires for the radio to the correct length. Then I had used my rock-weighted venetian blind cord to hoist the di-pole up, so that the centre of the antenna was about 2.5 metres above ground. That done, I looked around for a workbench … ah, the Sulo bin outside the camp kitchen – just the right height and a good hard surface. I wheeled it over and positioned it under the coax feeder where it hung from the balun, stretched tightly between two trees and at the antenna's mid-point. I hooked it up to the radio, plugged in the now fully-charged 12V NiMH battery pack and switched on.

Voices! Conversations!

I find it hard to describe the thrill of this small technical achievement.

You will have guessed by now that I am something of a technical freak, so when I plan things like this and they work, it is to me like a snort of cocaine to a druggie. And when things go wrong, as happened with my solar panel, and I am able to identify the problem and actually fix it, I am liable to become quite euphoric.

On this day, I was almost beside myself with ill-suppressed excitement.

My antenna was tuned for the 40 meter band. First was VK3FI – Noel in Mildura, Victoria, on 7.090MHz. When I spoke to him he received me on 'strength 9' which was excellent. He was surprised I was using only 5 watts. Modesty, I discovered, was becoming an elusive quality.

Next I picked up VK3FNKC. The 'F' indicated a foundation amateur radio operator with an entry level licence.

Then I tuned in to VK3UH, also from Victoria.

I didn't realise it at the time but Bill was listening to me talk to these people.

I was flying!

I tuned around the band and heard VK2SD – Jay from Charlestown in Newcastle. Another 'Wow!' If I could talk to him I would be able to get Bill.

Next I got VK5HJS who was underground on the Coober Pedy opal fields.

It would be an understatement to say that I was having fun. I was talking to folk all over the place. I contacted people in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia before I decided to give it a rest and check on the sat phone. I was anxious to be on my way, but I was being held in Hawker pending the arrival of the phone.

The worst part was that I was now having second thoughts about it. My shoulders had been getting sore after half an hour of walking, and the phone would add considerably to my weight. I would not be able to use it freely because of the cost of calls – and my radio was now working to perfection. Did I really need a sat phone back-up? But it was too late to cancel it. I had telephoned the supplier, Australian Satellite Services in Adelaide, and a lady called Glennis had assured me it had left Perth and would be in Hawker in a day or so.

I was back on the radio at 4pm, making more contacts. At 4.30pm I called Roger (VK4BNQ):

Victor kilo four bravo november quebec this is victor kilo four x-ray juliet juliet. Do you copy?

VK4XJJ port 5, VK4BNQ. Afternoon Jeff. Good signal.

I swelled with pride. I realised immediately that I'd forgotten to add *portable 5* indicating that I was in South Australia, not Queensland – and that Roger had politely reminded me. I didn't care, I knew I was pretty raw and mike-shy and that I would improve, particularly with Roger's gentle correcting. Hams are generally forgiving of 'newbies' and allow a lot of latitude. I was also aware that amateur radio clubs meet regularly all over Australia and the world, and that they allow a great deal of time for teaching, mainly in small groups. They also hold structured 'classroom' lessons where experienced hams pass on their knowledge.

All this flicked through my mind as I bent over the radio to continue my conversation.

ROGER! IT WORKS! I made the balun with the bits you sent and followed your instructions. It was pretty easy really, and I am happy with the result. I've spoken to half a dozen hams all over and it works! Over.

I had a fleeting image of the nation's hams smiling indulgently at this new kid on the block. Should I have said *over* or had I been seeing too many movies?

That's great Jeff. You're coming in nice and clear here too. I heard you being interviewed on Brisbane ABC yesterday and managed to record it on tape. Back to you.

Oh God, I shouldn't have said *over*.

Unlike a telephone you can't hear the other person while you are transmitting with your microphone button pressed, so it is best to have a formal handover. It is not always the case – a clear signal and familiarity with the person at the other end can make it unnecessary.

We chatted for about fifteen minutes and agreed to come on air again in the morning.

I was ecstatic; my radio, battery pack and solar panel were in full working order. Things don't get much better than this, I thought.

There was more good news: the battery pack I had 'designed' to be charged from the solar panel had done its job. I had been on air more than an hour and it was still going strong. Technically speaking, it had been a shaky start to the project but now I had no concerns about communication. If there was an emergency I would be able to make radio contact with a ham anywhere in Australia and have my situation relayed to Bill or Roger. I would have my two-man support team on a string. It was very reassuring.

Humming quietly to myself I packed away my radio gear like a mother wrapping her new-born baby then headed for the pub for some serious boasting.

*

It was twelve degrees this morning, the coldest since leaving Port Augusta. Not that I was cold – I had checked the weather records along my proposed route and I was equipped for minus three degrees. Even so, it was a brisk start to the day.

As usual my first stop was the post office but sadly there was no sat phone. It was no surprise, everything would have had to fall in place for it to arrive today. It would be here tomorrow, I told myself. I would leave the following day, on Friday.

I wandered over to the library and spent an hour browsing the shelves. I love reading. I'll read anything, and I was missing not having a book in the tent at night. But books are heavy; carrying one in my pack was out of the question.

I dragged myself away from the shelves and settled down to the Internet. There was a lot to reply to which was no surprise. I had been using email since

I first accessed the Internet in 1990. I'd even set up an internet service provider business. That was in the days before the World Wide Web when there were just email users and newsgroups which allowed users to join in discussions on selected subjects.

With my email attended to, I checked DeafBlind's web page to see if they had included anything about my walk. Nothing there. Janne had told me that a volunteer was supposed to be setting it up but it had obviously not yet been done.

While I was in the library I received a cell phone call from the ABC's South Australia and regional areas station requesting another live interview, this time with Annette Marner, presenter of the late afternoon segment. This Adelaide-based service covers the regional areas of South Australia and into Broken Hill – a vast area. It was arranged that I would be on air at 4.30pm.

I returned to the caravan park to sort out my pack and, hopefully, cull some gear. That sat phone (no pun intended) was weighing on me quite heavily. I also wanted to review my route to Birdsville, the northern limit to the maps I was carrying. I laid out all the maps like a giant jigsaw puzzle and immediately realised I had inadvertently printed three which missed the road I would be following by twenty or thirty kilometres. Brilliant! I knew Bill had the maps on his computer but it would be difficult describing the ones I wanted. It was infuriating. I had spent hours selecting the areas to print and making the scale of each map consistent, and still I had made an error.

New neighbours moved in. They were Walter Windy and Maria Betels, a German couple who were travelling in a well-appointed four-wheel-drive. I was touched by their story. They had become friendly with an Australian couple they had met in Germany, and were now touring the outback in the Australians' four-wheel-drive. 'Keep it as long as you like,' they had been told.

My radio interview went without a hitch and radio contact with Roger was excellent. Bill was harder to pick up among the static – he was working on a better antenna system for his house in Stockton.

*

The following morning the sat phone was waiting for me at the post office. I quaked when I saw the size of the package. I thought, my God, I'll need a packhorse to carry the bloody phone. However, it wasn't as bad as it seemed and when I unwrapped everything I saw that there were attachments I could do without. I finally settled on the 240V charger, the 12V charger, the leather cover, the instruction manual, (at last – I would have something to read) and, of course, the phone. I mailed the rest back to Bill, including my mobile phone and its chargers which would be of no use after tomorrow. I also included my new

glasses case with the broken ones inside.

Bill had meanwhile arranged for me to be interviewed by the Wireless Institute of Australia (WIA) which is the peak body for ham operators throughout Australia. The interview would be conducted and recorded by Graham Kemp (VK4BB) to be played during the Sunday morning WIA news broadcast over amateur radio frequencies in all states. I had no qualms over this one as I would be talking to another technical person about radios and antennas.

Back at the caravan park I emptied everything from my pack and laid it out on the grass next to my tent. It presented an unusual sight and I soon had a small crowd of onlookers watching my every move, offering advice and freely discussing the merits of my possessions among themselves. I tried desperately to find something I could discard but there was precious little. Resignedly, I repacked everything except my tent.

I left for the pub for a last drink with Big John. I gave him a receipt made out to 'Hawker Hotel and customers' for $158.70 in donations. I thought it a pretty good effort for such a small town but there was more to come – a bloke called Alistair wandered over to check out what was going on and he gave me $50, the biggest single donation so far.

Big John and I had more photographs taken outside the pub door with me in full rig. It was a nice moment, we had become firm friends. He gave me the names of the managers of Rawnsley Park Caravan Park, my next stop, and told me to be sure to look up Peter at Innamincka. Innamincka! That was a month and a half away. Then we made final promises to keep in touch and I returned to the caravan park for a good night's sleep. However, it wasn't an early night – I had new neighbours.

Camped next to me were a German woman and her ten-year-old son. What is it about all these Germans?

Beatrice had been in a relationship with an Aussie who was the father of the boy, Florian. They were no longer romantically attached – she and the boy lived in Germany, her former partner in Australia. She had brought Florian to Australia to give him a taste of the culture and to allow him to bond with his father. I thought that was wonderful.

Beatrice was in her forties, about 167 centimetres and dressed in the style of the Australian outback – casual, bordering on sloppy. She spoke perfect, almost accent-free English. Florian, aged about ten, was a bright lad but I noticed that he showed no interest in exploring the caravan park, preferring to cling to his mother. Perhaps the culture shock of moving from the orderliness of Germany to the Aussie Never-Never was too great.

We talked late into the night.

CHAPTER 8

A day at the opera

20 – 24 April, days 16 – 20

(25km NE of Hawker – Lat: 31:43.573 Long: 138:31.213)

I woke in a happy, expectant frame of mind. After more than a week in Hawker I had started feeling almost settled, a part of the community. I had made a lot of friends, I knew my way around the town as well as the locals and I had been comfortable. But I was champing at the bit. My equipment was working and it was time to go. A man could be too comfortable, I decided.

When I booked out of the caravan park the previous day I had offered to pay Corrie Sitters all or part of the fees. I felt obliged to do this as it had been Janne who had initially suggested a camping fee donation for a couple of days, and I had been there eight days. However, Corrie insisted on donating fees for three days, for which I gave her a DeafBlind receipt.

And so, on the morning of Friday 20 April, with my debts cleared and my farewells made, I humped my pack on to my back – and felt my knees give slightly. It was definitely heavier than when I arrived. This was not altogether surprising; I was now carrying the satellite phone and its equipment, not to mention some fruit and a modest slab of fruitcake which had proved irresistible. I was also conscious though not resentful of the twenty metres of antenna wire I was carrying which would keep me in touch with the world beyond my horizon.

On the plus side – or should that be minus – because my next stop was Rawnsley Park only thirty-eight kilometres away, I could halve the amount of water I carried, saving four kilograms in weight. But what about the next leg when I might have to carry the full eight kilograms of water? Of course by then, I would have eaten the cake and fruit …the mind dwells on such things when walking across Australia.

My other concern was my decision to ditch my cell phone. That sounds ridiculous given that it would soon be out of range, but it had given me a feeling of security. I had always used it fairly extensively, and now I didn't have it. As I said, the mind plays tricks out there.

The sat phone was there for an emergency (I assumed the media would pay for interview calls) but I had to admit that I was not very good at using it. I had flipped through the manual, but I needed to do more work to become proficient in its use. The big disappointment was its SMS messaging capability: you can send an SMS on it, but you can't receive one. This was a blow because I had been assured throughout my many conversations with the suppliers that full SMS was available. On top of that, the keypad function was pure dinosaur. I reckon I can whip out an SMS as fast as a teenager with five thumbs but this system was a shocker. However, it was capable of sending and receiving email and for that I was grateful. I still had to use the Fred Flintstone keyboard but at least it worked.

It took me a week to master the sat phone. One of the problems was that in passing on the number to Bill, the last two numbers somehow became transposed – 47 instead of 74. Precisely who was to blame for the mistake depends on who is telling the story. The support guy from the phone company helped as much as he could but he was also labouring under the handicap imposed by the transposed numbers.

Adding to all these complications was the fact that if I failed to answer it within two rings, it switched automatically to voice mail, sending a message to the caller that either the phone was not switched on or was out of reach. You can imagine my epileptic scramble to get to it when it rang. It was very frustrating. It was even more frustrating for the person at the other end who was being told the phone was not turned on or out of range, seemingly before it had even rung. And because it was too big to carry in my pocket it had to go in one of the backpack pockets.

My hassles with voice mail were nightmares. Occasionally, when I knew I had just missed a call, I would check my voice messages, only to discover that the caller hadn't left one. This was serious stuff when you consider that such calls were charged at the maximum rate.

Because satellite phones are not considered to be in any particular country they are allocated country and area codes, which means you are lumbered with so many figures, your phone number looks like a spillage from a lottery barrel. For Bill to call me he had to ring international dialing from Australia (0011), followed by my 'country' code (8816), then my area code (214), and finally my number, (63874). By the time he had done all that he was in

North Mulga Station framed by struggling eucalypts, vehicle wrecks and red pindan. There was nobody home when I arrived; the 'roo-shooter-in-residence had 'gone to town' for the day.

The scenery along the gas pipeline road from Moomba to Adelaide can be a little monotonous. This picture was taken north of Moolawatana Station..

A car stops on the Strzelecki Track.

A track to nowhere – or so it seemed. This stretch was on flooded Moolawatana Station in the North Flinders Ranges.

My solar panel charged my batteries and the flynet made life bearable. I was not a pretty sight but it didn't matter: I was dressed and equipped to survive.

Photographing the photographer: there were times when I felt like a public exhibit.

There is something almost therapeutic about a boiling billy.

I found myself the centre of attention when this tag-a-long team pulled over south of Merty Merty Station. I delivered a short talk on my walk and was rewarded with cake, fruit and tea.

Water birds in flight at Cooper Creek near Innamincka.

Wild horses keep an eye on my progress north of Innamincka.

A shady waterhole near Cordillo Downs Station.

Message understood. This was the entrance to Cordillo Downs Station, ten kilometres south of the homestead.

The heritage-listed Cordillo Downs woolshed, the world's biggest, was built in 1833. Note the enormous roof span.

danger of forgetting why he was ringing.

Sending emails had me tearing my hair out. The address book made it a little easier but there was no 'sent' folder which meant I had to re-type every message.

If I have given the impression that satellite telephones have yet to emerge into the 21st Century, I offer nothing by way of apology.

Back to the walk.

As I said, I left Hawker carrying more weight than when I arrived but I was not seriously concerned. I was on the road, I was walking and it felt good that my lone expedition was on track again.

A sign just out of town advised that it was fifty-four kilometres to Wilpena. The Rawnsley Park Caravan Park which Big John had recommended was at the outer edge of Wilpena Pound, not far from the road I was following. I aimed to reach there the next night.

There was the usual confusion of side roads outside of Hawker but I was looking for 'The Dairy Farm' which my map indicated was ten kilometres away, the perfect distance for a lunch stop. It was not to be – by the time I reached the turnoff to Farleigh Station I realised that there was no Dairy Farm. Or if there was, I could not see it.

Finding a tree, I dropped the pack on the ground and had lunch – a drink of water – and sent off a sat phone email to Bill, giving my noon position in latitude and longitude. I had previously been doing this using my mobile phone SMS. My message was brief and to the point: *All OK noon position 31:49.019S 138:28.817E*.

I had been back on the road only thirty minutes when I heard a car approaching from behind, beginning to slow down. It was a medium-sized sedan and, when it pulled up alongside, I was delighted to see Beatrice and Florian. Beatrice shot me a wide smile but Floran jumped from the car, ran around the front and came to a stop in front of me, his arms held high. When I picked him up I was rewarded with the type of hug normally reserved for grandfathers and favourite uncles. He was beaming and chattering twenty to the dozen; I guessed that Beatrice had told him they would be passing me and suddenly, there I was.

When I lowered him to the ground Beatrice said she had some goodies for me to see me on my way. I accepted an apple but declined everything else. I knew they were travelling on a small budget, but apart from that, I didn't need anything. Beatrice took several pictures of me and asked how she could contact me after my walk. I gave her Bill's email address saying, 'Yes, let's keep in touch.' We parted with a kiss which I planted on her upturned face while leaning

through the window with my backpack on. It must have looked rather comical but when she had gone I knew I was walking with a new spring in my stride.

The scenery turned quite spectacular. The road followed Arkaba Creek which was only five hundred metres on my left, and there was a line of trees along the creek bed that gave dark green relief to the cleared grazing land. Beyond that were the foothills to the Flinders Ranges.

I stopped for a look around the historic Arkaba woolshed which had been restored, though the inevitable stone ruins were there to remind me of the early settlers.

I had walked twenty-five kilometres when I came to an attractive roadside picnic area with a timber table and a large tree from which I could hang my new antenna. It was perfect. When I consulted my map I discovered it actually had a name: Eating House Creek.

I looked around. No house and nothing to eat. Well … at least there was a creek. There was no water in it but there would be when it rained.

*

When I crawled from my tent I was delighted to see lots of sheep and several kangaroos, all grazing in the early morning light. The sheep ignored me but the kangaroos lifted their heads, their ears pricked for danger. I froze, waiting to see what happened. I suppose we made a strange sight, me half out of the tent on all fours, the kangaroos on their hind legs and the sheep oblivious to anything untoward. One by one the roos decided I posed no threat and returned to nibbling the sparse brown grass. Even when I began packing up there was no headlong rush away, they merely dispersed in ones and twos towards the trees along Arkaba Creek until they were swallowed by the thick undergrowth. I would have been hard pressed to think of a more idyllic start to my day.

My tent, however, was drenched. I thought at first there must have been a heavy overnight dew and it was only when I checked over the bare ground, away from the parking area, that I realised it had been raining. I decided it must have been a light shower because I had heard nothing. Nevertheless, I unclipped the tent outer and spread it over a nearby picnic table to dry. That done, I transferred some water from a two-litre cordial bottle in my pack to my 'day bottles' – the reused iced coffee containers.

After brief radio sessions with Roger and Bill, and saying hello to a couple of hams that 'dropped in' by radio, I pulled down the aerial and packed everything away. I was now incommunicado. I was on my own.

Smiling with satisfaction I started towards Rawnsley Park Caravan Park less than fifteen kilometres ahead. I was enjoying the walking so much I was

starting to view stopovers as an inconvenience. I didn't need them, my need now was to start putting respectable distances between breaks.

The road continued along Arkaba Creek which was twenty metres away on my left. I could see it turning slightly to the right where it passed between a significant rise and a range of hills running away to the left. It was quite pretty for that part of the world.

At 10am I stopped for a short break and had a look at my map. The feature on my right, which rose to an altitude of 570 metres, had the unpronounceable name of Yaltaordla Hill and marked the start of the Ulowdna Range. Immediately ahead was my first view of the outer hills of Wilpena Pound, one of the Flinders Ranges' most important tourist attractions. The turnoff to Rawnsley Park was 1.5 kilometres away.

This lovely caravan park and its restored and modernised woolshed are tucked into Wilpena Pound's foothills which form the perfect backdrop. It was almost lunchtime when I arrived and the only person in sight was a bloke sitting at a table on a verandah, enjoying a cool drink and the spectacular scenery.

I was tucking into a pretty good hamburger and chips when the owner, Ron, came over and introduced himself.

'How long are you staying?' he asked.

'Only overnight,' I said. 'I've just spent a week in Hawker.'

'That's a shame, you'll miss the opera.'

Opera? I thought he was having a lend of me then I remembered seeing the posters.

'Tomorrer, after lunch,' he said. 'We're expecting quite a crowd.'

He made it sound as though opera companies had been coming to Wilpena Pound every weekend for years. Then he noticed my T-shirt and probably connected me with one of my radio interviews.

'You're welcome to stay and move among the crowd and collect for your charity,' he said.

Damn and blast! I had intended staying the night and heading off for Wilpena in the morning. In fact I'd considered giving Rawnsley a miss; after all, I'd only walked half a day. I thought quickly. There was every chance of raising a substantial sum for DeafBlind. On top of that, Ron was giving me the sort of look that demanded a positive response – and I *had* made a pledge to smell the roses.

'Right,' I said. 'I'll stay the night and come over in the morning. When's kick-off?'

'Come and join me for breakfast. About seven o'clock.'

I told Ron that I would be trying to get on to the ABC's regular Sunday

morning program 'Australia All Over' to have a chat with Ian 'Macca' McNamara, the show's presenter.

'How would you feel about having one of the opera singers performing on air?' I asked expansively. 'Might get a few of them on.'

Ron was impressed and said he was sure that Bill Snell, the Bel Canto Opera owner, would jump at the chance.

I discovered that the actual caravan park was several kilometres away and that the nearby cabins were attached to the restaurant for diners who stayed the night. I was expected at the caravan park.

I made my way there and discovered that the managers, John and Vivienn, had been contacted by Janne, and that arrangements had been made for me to stay the night. I was duly allocated a spot up the back where I could hoist my antenna into the trees without annoying anybody. It was a good position and I would be able to leave the antenna up overnight.

I was leaving the booking office when a voice from behind said, 'You made it.'

I turned to see a pretty young woman's beaming smile. It took me a second, then I remembered: a small sedan had pulled up somewhere along the track with three young women onboard who had offered me water. They said they had been to the big smoke and were returning to this caravan park where they all worked. They had driven off with a, 'Come and see us when you get to the park.'

So here I was, and Kate had recognised me. I should add that I placed no significance in this – middle aged men walking across Australia wearing solar panels tend to be thin on the ground.

I spent the best part of an hour on a public phone trying to contact 'Australia All Over' with singular lack of success. I called every ABC number I could find but all I got was the show's 1300 number. I returned to my tent thoroughly depressed but determined to get on the phone before daybreak to arrange an on-air operatic performance for Macca.

Camped next to me were Neil Drummond and Lorraine Breust who invited me to share their stir fry dinner in their van. They had run a successful landscaping business and were enjoying the fruits of their retirement. We talked late into the night and at the end of it they gave a $20 donation to DeafBlind.

It had been a great day, the only fly in the ointment was my so far unfulfilled undertaking to organise at least one opera singer's appearance on one of the nation's most popular radio shows.

I like to listen to the radio in bed. In fact, I usually fall asleep with it on, so I knew before I started this walk that I needed a small radio that would run a

long time on its batteries. On this Saturday night I drifted off to a barely audible ABC (I keep it turned down when in a camping area), conscious of having to be awake early in the morning.

I awoke at 4.30am to the unmistakable 'Australia All Over'. It had been on for half an hour.

Scrambling from my tent into velvet darkness I hurried across to the public telephone outside the park office. I called the 1300 number and was put through to Lee Kelly, the show's producer. I told her my story of walking across Australia for DeafBlind and of the outback operatic performance at Rawnsley Park.

'The singers will be up and about by seven o'clock,' I said confidently. I gave her the restaurant's phone number and she said I could expect a call about eight o'clock.

I returned to my tent feeling like an entrepreneur who had just signed up the London Philarmonic for a concert at Sydney Opera House. I crawled back into my tent and listened to Macca until 6am when I made my way to the ablution block for a shower. When I passed on the good news to Ron he was so delighted he offered me breakfast, which I gratefully accepted.

The sky had now lightened from inky black to a piccaninny dawn of light blues and flaming gold – which was all very well, except there was no sign of my opera singers. Even Bill, the owner of the company, had failed to surface. Where the hell were they? There were four singers and a pianist … surely *one* of them would front up! I had visions of going on national radio and saying, 'Hang about Macca, I'll just go and round 'em up.'

I fretted, I paced, I swore, I gave up. Dejectedly, I returned to the restaurant's telephone to await the call.

The story has a terrible anticlimax. The phone did not ring and, when I eventually rang Lee myself, soon after 8 o'clock, she apologised profusely, explaining that they she had not been able to fit me in. However, she asked me to call her the following Sunday as they were interested in my story.

The path of an ambitious entrepreneur can be very stony, I decided. In fact, I had mixed emotions: I was glad I hadn't rousted the opera singers out of bed but I was feeling let down as I plodded back to my tent.

I decided on another clean-up and, gathering together all my dirty clothes, I headed for the laundry where everything, including my sleeping bag, went through the full washing cycle. It was the first time I had put a sleeping bag through a washing machine and I breathed a sigh of relief when it emerged unscathed.

I had just hung it on the washing line when John appeared and said I

could stay the extra night for no charge.

My chores completed, I pulled on my backpack and solar panel and headed back to the restaurant for a midday lunch and the operatic performance, which was due to start at 2.30pm.

The restaurant is two kilometres from the caravan park along a walking and cycling trail that winds haphazardly along a dry creek bed, roughly following the contours of the land. I decided that for a change, I would make a bee-line for the restaurant, cutting across sparse country. I emerged near one of the eco cabins nestled in the hillside above the settlement. I'd had no idea the accommodation was so extensive; they had done well to hide the cabins in such open country.

I arrived as a tourist bus pulled in and disgorged twenty-five to thirty well-dressed people who had the 'city' look about them. They had obviously come for the performance and – it turned out – a wine tasting.

The restaurant and its verandah were decked out for the occasion. A beautifully laid out luncheon was awaiting and there were tables with white cloths and wine glasses. Some visitors, obviously old hands, had brought their own chairs and picnic tables. But the star of the show was the backdrop, the Flinders Ranges, rising majestically from the plains to the sky in purple silhouette.

A battered old ten-tonne truck seemed to lend to the outback atmosphere. It had been backed up to the verandah, its tray converted into a stage for microphones and speakers. In the interests of aesthetics the truck's rusting cab was draped with a painter's drop sheet.

As I entered this scene of ordered artistry I was greeted by Ron and Bill who indicated a corner where I could drop my pack. Then Ron led me into a dining room of polished floors, stainless steel smorgasbords cabinets and food displays that were as good as any I had seen.

'Help yourself,' said Ron. 'What would you like to drink?'

I followed his glance to the well-appointed bar where two smartly turned-out barmen were in charge. One of them acknowledged Ron's nod and quick glance towards me which said, 'Look after this bloke.'

I must confess to being somewhat bewildered. I had half expected a cool reception after the Macca fiasco but he was treating me as though I were an honoured guest. Determined not to disappoint I – daintily at first – selected a few morsels from a plate a waitress held out to me, and headed to the bar for my obligatory can of Solo. Without putting too fine a point on it, I can say that I enjoyed lunch immensely. I've always liked smorgasbords because you can keep going back for more without looking too much of a glutton – which I'm

quite capable of doing.

The place filled with chatter, laughter and the clinking of glasses and plates and, within a short time, it was standing room only in the restaurant. There was an interesting mix of people; there were city folk dressed to kill; landed gentry from the stations in their R.M. Williams gear of wide-brimmed hats, checkered shirts and wide leather belts; and there was a sprinkle of grey nomads and drop-ins dressed in the 'best' unwrinkled gear they had been able to find. And then there was me in my DeafBlind T-shirt, shorts and walking boots.

I was watching this mingling of social classes when a bloke who had the look of a property manager came over. He was dressed in smart casual clothes and he exuded the confidence and authority common to such people.

'I'm Warren Fargher, Wirrealpa Station,' he said, proffering a big brown hand. 'You'll be going past our place. Make sure you drop in.'

My immediate reaction was where the hell is Wirrealpa? Unwilling to show my ignorance I asked him to spell it and as soon as he had gone I fished around for paper and pencil and wrote it down. But he must have been watching because I was still finding somewhere to put the piece of paper when there was a tap on my shoulder.

'Have my business card,' he said.

I mingled with the crowd and found an artist at work on a water colour. He was capturing the scene beautifully. But what a character! He had a long white beard and gnarled facial features that bespoke a lifetime in the bush. I reckoned he would have had a million stories to tell. I would have loved a long campfire chat with him, but I wasn't the only one – he was surrounded by people, all wanting his attention. I hoped our paths would cross again, preferably when there was nobody else around.

The singers were a knockout. I am no fan of opera but when those four people started singing I was damn near mesmerised. There were no props or elaborate stage settings or magnificent costumes, just four superb voices and a piano blending to perfection in the most perfect of settings. Even the battered old truck looked dead right. There must have been three hundred people there and every one of them appeared captivated by the sheer beauty of the moment. The performers must have realised they had the audience in the palms of their hands because they rose to the occasion, sometimes bringing tears to our eyes and sometimes making us laugh.

Bill Snell took the stage and announced an interval to allow the singers time for a drink. I was making a Solo-inspired dash for the toilet when Ron grabbed me.

'Not so fast, Jeff. Get your pack and solar panel on.'

I thought I was being kicked out. Perhaps my dress had been deemed unsuitable … maybe I'd scoffed too much of their food.

He obviously read my thoughts because he grinned and said, 'I want you on stage with your gear on.' I looked at him, stunned. 'To tell 'em about yer walk. Raise some money.'

I broke out in a sweat. A radio interview is one thing, talking to three hundred people who have just been entertained in a very professional way is something else. I thought of the old adage: never share a stage with children or animals, mentally adding opera singers.

'What'll I say?' I croaked.

Dismissing the question as though it were of no consequence, he shepherded me to my pack, stood over me while I kitted up, and led me on to the back of the truck where he grabbed a microphone.

'Can I have your attention for a moment, please?' he said after tapping the mike.

Silence fell like a blanket. A wet blanket, I thought.

'Now you may have seen this bloke (jerking a thumb at me) walking along the road or hanging around here today (yeah, thanks Ron). Well, his name's Jeff Johnson and he's walking from the bottom of Australia to the top with just his backpack and no support vehicle. (I felt three hundred pairs of eyes focus on me then flick back to Ron). I asked him to come along today so I could show him off to you because he's one brave man. I know; I live out here. He's raising awareness for the DeafBlind Association and I would like you to find him later and give generously. Jeff, a few words, please.'

Gawd, what a pickle! Everything had been carefree chatter before this. Now there was tomb-like silence. It was like being under a microscope. I glanced at Ron but there was no help there.

'Uh, hello,' I said.

As an opening to an address it seemed to lack something, but I stumbled on. 'As remote as it is out here I love the Australian outback and feel quite at home in it. I was surprised to see such a large gathering, especially for such a cultured event.' (Shit, I shouldn't have said that). I prattled on about my walk and DeafBlind for a couple of minutes before winding up and handing over to Ron.

'Thanks, Jeff,' he said. 'Now don't forget, Jeff will be here all afternoon and he would appreciate those donations.'

We were clapped off the stage and as I made my way through the tables to get out of my pack I received several 'Goodonyas' and 'Good job.'

I was receiving donations before I got rid of the pack. I set myself up at a

small table at the top of the ramp, took out a receipt book and began scribbling with one hand and taking money with the other. I raised $250.

After the concert I took photographs and, extracting myself from the throng, I made my way back to the caravan park to attend to the more mundane business of taking in my washing. My sleeping bag was still damp, so I put it through a tumble dryer and sat watching it like an expectant father – a cold night was coming up and I had nowhere to sleep but in my tent. I need not have worried, it emerged dry, fluffy and smelling like roses.

Such is the life of the entrepreneur, I thought – all highs and lows.

*

Determined to make an early start after my day-and-a-half holiday, I was creeping quietly away from the caravan park across scrunching gravel by 6.30am. But when I saw Ron unpacking goods from his car boot at the restaurant I stopped to say goodbye.

'Why don't you come in for breakfast?' he said.

'Only if you let me give you a hand with the unloading.'

I thought the deal had been struck but by the time I'd got rid of my pack there was only one box left in the car. I carried it in, but it was hardly fair exchange for the breakfast I was given. He must have told the staff to load my plate because he would never have made a profit dishing up serves as big as the one I had. However, I did it justice and, wiping my chops with a purple napkin, I thanked the staff, all of whom wished me well. Ron followed me to my pack and we chatted while I hitched up. Then, with a handshake and an awkward blokey hug, I turned and resumed my journey.

(My brother Bill would meet me at the end of the walk and we would drive back along my route to see the places I had visited and meet some of the people I had described. One of the highlights of that return trip was introducing him to Ron, who was moving on when his Woolshed Restaurant lease expired. He went to Wilpena, where the Bel Canto Bush Opera is now based).

With a stomach full of eggs, bacon, tomatoes and sausage, a plentiful supply of water and a sleeping bag like grandma's feather bed, I was soon walking with a spring in my stride. The distance to Wilpena was thirteen kilometres ATCF – my own invented and fully patented acronym for 'as the crow flies'. This was the distance I was emailing to Bill on my sat phone's klunky keyboard. It was an important point because the ATCF distance of thirteen kilometres was what was indicated on my Gecko 101 GPS, but the distance by road was twenty-three kilometres – a big difference when you are on foot. I powered on, hoping to cover fifteen to eighteen kilometres.

First, however, I had to retrace the one and a half kilometres back to

the main road; it was not a big distance, more a psychological thing. I was pondering this when the silence was shattered by the roar of a Cessna light aircraft taking off from the strip alongside the road. I guessed they were people returning home from the concert who had stayed the night. The first plane was followed by another. It was interesting to watch because the airstrip was on a flat stretch amid rising terrain, so that the aircraft had to establish an immediate steady climb before turning steeply away from the hills to clear the Wilpena Pound ridges, two of which, Point Bonney and St Mary Peak, rose more than a thousand metres.

Point Bonney was my companion for the next four hours. The road, which was still sealed, curved slowly around the outside of The Pound past Rawnsley Bluff, Point Bonney, Mt Karawarra, Binya Peak and finally Ohlssen Bagge. They were all spectacular with peaks only two or three kilometres from the road.

The country was slowly changing with lots of pine-like trees on both sides of the road. I later discovered from Athol, a Wilpena volunteer with a magnificent white beard, that they were northern or white pines (*callitris glaucophylla*) and that their timber was strong, hard and resistant to white ants. Not surprisingly, they were used by the early settlers for building material and fence posts. Some of these fence posts can still be found, a hundred years after they were sunk into the ground.

I was now officially in the Flinders Ranges National Park – a roadside marker said so. There was also a sign urging me to be nice to the environment and advising that park fees applied. Dogs, it was noted, were not allowed – they were dangerous to native animals and anyway, there was an active dingo baiting program which could cause Pappy the Poodle a sudden but painful demise.

The bit about the park fees was interesting. You will remember that I had checked with National Parks in Port Augusta and that they had shown no interest in my venture. However they told me not to worry about paying park fees, and rangers I met along the way had given me similar advice.

Slowly the road did a full turn to the west and south-west following Wilpena Creek into the caravan park and resort area, all of it right in the middle of the roughly circular range. I had always assumed that Wilpena Pound was the remnant of an ancient volcano – it certainly has that appearance – so I was surprised to learn that the centre was actually created by floods. Heavy rains in ages long past had eroded the feature before escaping through gaps in the range, mainly Wilpena Creek**.**

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The Wilpena resort and caravan park had the distinction in 1998 of being powered by the largest solar power installation in the southern hemisphere.

It is owned and operated by AGL who also provide power to Telstra and the nearby Flinders Ranges National Park headquarters. The output from the solar panels is 100MW. They have 1250 modules, each with a capacity of 80W. My own chest-mounted solar panel suffered a little by comparison.

My first impression on arriving at Wilpena Resort was that it was indeed a resort. Many caravan parks install a few transportable cabins and write 'Resort' into their signage but this was a resort in the true sense of the word. There was a wide sealed parking area, several bays for tourist buses, two fuel bowsers and a large office and general store. There was also a tourist information centre on the verandah staffed by volunteers. They even had a map showing the areas covered by UHF radio repeaters located throughout the national park for use by rangers and the public. This was of interest to me because I was carrying a handheld UHF two-way radio in my pack. It meant that I had an extra back-up in case of an emergency.

The place was jumping. Two staff were working flat out answering phones, making bookings and attending to people queuing at the desk. When my turn came I asked if I was booked in but they had never heard of me. Slightly deflated, I paid my camping fee and headed for the shop which was as crowded as the office. It was as big as the general store back in Hawker where the population was three hundred.

I realised that this was the end of the line for the 'fair weather' travellers from the south. Wilpena was four hundred kilometres from Adelaide, with bitumen all the way, but this was where the sealed road stopped. It was where families came to see The Pound before returning to the comforts of civilisation.

It occurred to me that a tin with a DeafBlind sticker, in a reasonably prominent position on the counter, might attract a few quid. (It might also save me the embarrassing business of having to rattle it under people's noses). When I asked at the counter I was told I would need permission from the office.

I nodded towards the caravan park reception. 'You mean over there?'

'No, the admin building is round at the motel.'

I was stunned. There was a *motel?*

I followed the road around the back of the shop and through the trees for seven hundred metres (bitumen all the way). There were side roads and walking trails heading off to the right, all of them well signed. I would discover that the resort sprawled over a hundred hectares and that there were sixty motel rooms, twenty-six of them deluxe suites. It was not what I had expected to find at Wilpena.

I was easing out of my pack harness on the office verandah when a

well dressed bloke approached. 'G'day. I saw you walking along the road from Hawker. You raising money for charity?'

'That's right,' I said indicating the DeafBlind logo on my T-shirt. 'I'm just going into the office. Be back in a minute.'

'It's just that I'd like to make a donation but we're off for a drive now.'

'No problems. I'll dig out the receipt book.'

We sat at a table with four chairs and, while I was writing a receipt for B. Kitchington for ten dollars, one of his mates arrived and pulled ten dollars from his wallet. I gave him a receipt as well. They were followed in quick succession by T. Salmon, I. Armstrong, A. Lambeth and B. Holmes, all of whom said, 'Goodonyamate' before heading off. It was a heart-warming experience. It wasn't just the generosity, it was the spontaneity with which they emerged from their rooms, saw what was happening and reached for their wallets.

I received a quick positive response to my request to leave a donation tin on the counter. It was agreed that I would leave it there until I returned at the end of August. I then high-tailed it back to the store and bought a two-litre billycan to use as a collection tin. With my entrepreneurial zeal now running on high octane, I returned to the office and asked if they would agree to Janne emailing them a photograph of me taking my first step at Port Augusta. 'I could stick it on the billy,' I explained, because they were looking a bit perplexed.

'No problem,' they said.

Far out! After we worked out the wording I strode from the office, leaving everything in their hands. I was so pleased with the idea I determined to try and do the same thing at each place along my way. Janne could email me a copy of the final Word document and it would become my standard flyer and collection tin wrap-around. Brilliant!

That piece of business satisfactorily completed, I crossed to the camping ground and found a good spot near the ablution block where I could set up my radio and antenna. I also found a power point in the laundry to recharge the sat phone.

My radio and antenna generated a fair bit of interest among some boys playing in the area who bombarded me with questions, and were almost spellbound when I began talking to Bill and Roger.

There were by now quite a few hams following my progress who, when they heard me in the evenings, invariably said hello. There were more than usual this night – they had heard my interview with Graham for WIA's Sunday news session. I added VHK3KC, VK4AAT and VK3FTHS to my contacts log book.

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After nearly three weeks of clear skies I awoke to one that was overcast.

Ominously overcast. I decided that getting an up-to-date weather report before I went any further, should have the highest priority.

My inspection of the camping area confirmed my earlier opinion that this was a big resort. There were caravans parked everywhere, always with lots of space between them and all connected by ill-defined tracks that wound through trees. And there were all kinds of vehicles, some with tents that were bigger than caravans.

I finished off some sausages from last night's barbecue with lashings of barbecue sauce and washed them down with two glasses of banana milk.

A couple of early walkers in their thirties stopped for a chat, and invited me back to their black four-wheel-drive, parked about half a kilometre away, for a cuppa. I promised to be along as soon as I had packed up. Then I remembered my number one priority: a weather report. Perhaps the staff would allow me to log into the Bureau of Meteorology internet site. However, the office wouldn't be open until 8am. I headed for the black four-wheel-drive.

The two walkers had been coming to The Pound every year for eleven years, sometimes for a week, sometimes a fortnight. They spent a lot of their time just sitting around enjoying the serenity of the bush, but they had also done all the four-wheel-drive tracks and walking tours, as well as the tourist flights. They had a saying about the joy flights: if you only make two tourist flights in your life, do Wilpena Pound twice. It seemed like sound advice to me.

While waiting for the queue at the office to clear a little I saw a notice board dedicated to the district's road and weather conditions, with isometric charts showing lines of pressure and cold fronts (similar to those shown on television weather reports). I found that I was able to read several days' forecast into the map. Well, put it this way … I reckoned I'd gleaned a better idea than if I had just looked out the window!

The road closures report was interesting. The park obviously took this information seriously, the result, I felt sure, of previous experiences with visitors whose off-road driving experience was limited to weekly ventures on to their street lawns to wash and polish their vehicles. There were four-wheel-drives everywhere but I noticed that few bore signs of a rugged life. However, there had been no rain for months around Wilpena with the result that all roads were open – including the sixty-kilometre stretch to Blinman, my next destination. It would take me three days and I would be camping out for two nights with no toilets.

Now I'm a self-confessed bushie but I have to admit to missing a flush toilet. I'm not even a 'long drop' fan. I know they are practical and sanitary and efficient and all the rest of it, but I still don't like them. There was one at Russell's

Allan Creek. He dug the long-drop with a post hole digger attached to a Bobcat, placed a seat over it and put a tin cubicle with a non-closing door over the seat. The first thing I did was build a septic tank system for a flush toilet.

Back to the weather report – I found a bloke behind the counter who was doing the early morning shift on his own, and obviously working on the weather forecast. As I was asking a favour I didn't want to interrupt him, but after waiting a good fifteen minutes I ranged alongside and asked if he could give me any sort of prediction for the next few days. He said he had already been on the net and was about to have a second look. The radar images showed extensive cloud cover and some rain, with none forecast for the Wilpena area. However, the isometric chart suggested rain in the near future. I left the office to do my own less scientific assessment and, finding a clear area, I made a full 360-degree check. I noted the wind, I studied the cloud and I sniffed the air like a bloodhound scenting a bitch in season. My assessment: not very good.

'Hoy!'

I swung around. She was a fair way away, back near the office ramp. It was the woman I had shared a stir fry with a few nights back at Rawnsley Park. The trouble was, I couldn't remember her name. Then she was joined by Neil; I remembered him – he was tall, well built and had a shaved head.

I said, 'G'day Neil' then turned to his partner.

'Lorraine,' she said.

We filled each other in on what we had been doing for the last few days before falling into a serious discussion about the weather. We all agreed that it was a bit iffy.

I returned to the office verandah where Athol, the white-bearded volunteer who had told me about the white pine timber, was manning the tourist booth. He advised me to take the walking trail to the old Wilpena homestead, four kilometres away. He said the homestead had been restored and was now the headquarters for the Flinders Ranges National Park staff. Athol put in his two bob's worth re the weather which caused me to wonder if I would be coming back for another enforced vacation. I hoped not. Smelling the roses was one thing but I had so far walked only nine days out of nineteen; at this rate I'd be overtaken by old age.

The trail out of the caravan park was well defined. It is part of the previously mentioned Heysen Trail but at Wilpena it has been included in many local walks. Some sections are as wide as a city footpath, scattered with woodchips and with timber borders. There were not many signs, however, and after one and a half kilometres I was clear of the park area, though still on the trail. It was leisurely walking until I came to a fence with a closed vehicle gate

from which hung a sign bearing the unambiguous message: NO TRESPASSING.

The trail made a definite turn to the left following the fence line but not going through the gate. The track on the other side of the fence was little more than a couple of wheel marks, almost overgrown with grass and small shrubs. There was no indication of a national park headquarters either through the gate or along the walking trail.

A decision was called for.

I decided to take the left turn and follow the walking trail. Over the next kilometre or so the track continued turning left which made me uneasy because I was heading north-west when my map was telling me it should be north-east. I also felt that I should have seen a windmill or perhaps a radio mast. However, emboldened by the still well-defined track, I pushed on through pretty countryside, crossing dry creek beds and cresting small hills, the track climbing all the time. I met two hikers coming from the opposite direction; we exchanged greetings, briefly discussed the cloud cover and went our separate ways.

A little further on I dropped my backpack, got out my map and GPS, and pinpointed my position on the map. I was still on the Heysen Trail but I was several kilometres off course for the Wilpena homestead. No matter, I knew precisely where I was and how to fix my mistake. I wasn't actually lost, I told myself, it was more a case of having lost my way. Thus reassured, I turned and retraced my steps.

I had walked only a few hundred metres when I came to a relatively clear area on a hilltop from where I could see a tall radio mast, away in the distance to my left. I figured it was the communications tower for the rangers' headquarters. I had missed it on the way up because it would have been over my shoulder and I had been concentrating on what was ahead.

When I arrived back at the gate, I found two young blokes studying their map, trying to figure out the way to Wilpena resort. I pointed them in the right direction and, when they were out of sight, I went through the gate, turning a blind eye to the NO TRESPASSING sign.

Fifteen minutes later, I came in sight of the Wilpena homestead. First, however, I had to cross Wilpena Creek which was dry, ten metres wide and had banks two metres high. This was the main outlet for the water that fell over The Pound, a feature seventeen kilometres long and eight kilometres wide. I was thinking how good it would be to see the creek in full flood when it occurred to me that the way the weather was building, I just might. The clouds, I had noticed, had turned even more threatening.

I followed the creek about fifty metres before coming to where cattle had worn enough of the bank away for me to cross on my two feet, instead of

sliding down on my backside.

The homestead is a wonderful example of how an old building can be turned into a tourist attraction, without spoiling its basic charm and history. There is an unsealed car park for thirty vehicles but it is some distance away from the buildings. A path from the car park to the homestead is well signed, and has information boards telling the homestead's history. A circular path takes you past the buildings, all of which have been sympathetically restored.

Tucked away at the rear is the rangers' headquarters which was so unobtrusive, I had to go looking for it. One room in the homestead had a modern look with posters and racks of pamphlets, but there was little else to indicate that this was the nerve centre for maintaining 950 square kilometres of national park.

I came across two blokes in working clothes, one fossicking in a storage shed, the other raking leaves. I nodded a 'hello' to the fossicker and introduced myself. Keeping my pack on, I said, 'Just wanted to congratulate you guys. This is the best place I've seen. I like the way it's presented as it was in the 1800s.'

'Thanks, yeah,' he said. 'We like it here to.' Holding out a hand, he said, 'I'm Tom.'

I said, 'Athol from the info tent on the Wilpena verandah directed me this way as a short cut. I'm thinking about hanging around for a while until the weather makes a decision, one way or another.'

'Which way are you heading? Are you walking the Heysen?'

Thinking that I'd better come clean I confessed to my wrong decision at the gate and my unplanned walk along the Heysen Trail.

'You're not the first,' he said. 'We'd better have a chat to Athol and maybe put a sign on the gate. Trouble is, we don't like too many signs around the place.'

I said, 'I'll be off. Is the boss ranger around anywhere? I'd like to let him know I'm waiting around to see if it rains.'

I followed his gaze to the second bloke who had stopped what he was doing to listen to our conversation. He grinned, introduced himself and invited me to take off my pack and tell them my story. I explained that my next stop was Blinman, sixty-five kilometres up the road to Wirrealpa and Arkaroola, and that I was heading for the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Tom told me he lived at Gum Creek Station with is wife Lisa and his parents, who ran the property.

'Make sure you drop in and say hello,' he said. 'And when you get to Blinman introduce yourself to Lisa. She runs the general store.'

I loaded up and headed off for the road leading out of Wilpena which

joined the Blinman road, three kilometres along. I had just cleared the homestead area when I saw an outbuilding and a closed-in four-wheel-drive light truck loaded with gear. Behind the outbuilding was a picnic table and barbecue. It struck me as a good place from which to watch the weather. The general consensus had been that the rain would arrive about 2pm – and it was barely midday.

I dumped my pack and knocked on the back door, intending to let them know what I was doing, and perhaps get their permission to shelter under the verandah if it started to rain. It was still reasonably bright outside but the unlit interior was as dark as the bottom of a beer barrel.

'G'day. We meet again!'

Though he was standing just inside the door, his face remained a dark silhouette. Then my eyes adjusted to the light. It was Athol.

'Come on in,' he said.

We discovered that we shared a number of interests, including astronomy. He took me to his truck and pulled out a telescope; it was a beauty. He was also interested in electronics and he delighted in showing me his multi-meter. It was an obvious treasure; it put my el-cheapo to shame. Then he pulled out a soldering iron, allowing me to repair the frayed wires where the bullet connectors were fitted to the ends of my solar panel wires. We discussed the stars, electronics, politics and we solved quite a few problems that were pressing down on the world. And I used his flush toilet.

The weather, meanwhile, hardly changed – threatening but still no rain. What was I to do? On the one hand this would be my last shelter, other than my tent, for a couple of days. On the other hand I needed to keep moving.

I decided to press on.

I said my third (or was it fourth?) goodbye for the day and headed for the T-junction of the resort road and the main road north.

The now-narrow, gravel main road meandered through and around hills and across gullies. I liked it. The surface made little difference to me and the country was interesting.

I covered the next ten kilometres to a Brachina Gorge turnoff in what seemed no time at all. I would dearly have liked to see the Gorge which is topped by Heysen Hill, but it was thirty kilometres away and out of the question.

I rested at the turnoff for about ten minutes before walking another kilometre and a half to the old Upalinna outstation, a substantial corrugated iron building which stood alongside well kept cattle yards. The water tanks held plenty of cool water and the place was obviously still in regular use.

I set up camp, pleased with my day's work.

CHAPTER 9

A ghostly call

25 April – 2 May, days 21 – 28

(Brachina Gorge turn-off, 28km south of Blinman – Lat: 31:18.914 Long: 138:41.123)

At 7am I took a peek outside. There had been rain overnight and it was still drizzling; a steady soaking drizzle that eventually dampens everything, including one's spirits. The sky was overcast and it was a cool seventeen degrees with no wind.

I took a stroll in shorts and T-shirt, mainly to stretch my legs but also to satisfy myself that it was too wet to start packing. The shorts and T-shirt were soon clinging to my skin which was all I needed to convince myself that this was a morning for a lie in. I crawled back inside my dry tent, snuggled into my sleeping bag and told myself that there were plenty of people in much worse circumstances. In fact I rather enjoyed lying there, listening to the steady patter of rain and imagining the parched earth gratefully soaking up every last drop. It's possible to become quite starry-eyed when it's raining and you are warm and dry.

There was a pattern to this rain. It seemed to fall quite steadily for a few minutes then ease off, then it would start again and so on.

About 9am it eased noticeably. I lay listening for about a quarter-of-an-hour and, when there was no sign of it starting again, I crawled outside. It was still overcast but there was definitely no rain. I decided to pack up and, an hour later, I was on the road.

I thought it would be wet underfoot but there were no puddles, there were not even signs of run-off; the thirsty ground must have absorbed the rain as it fell. The road, meanwhile, was quite busy – by that I mean there was a car about every half hour. Imagine explaining that to somebody from England:

'Yeah, a lot of traffic today … must have averaged two cars an hour.'

There were northern Cypress trees everywhere, in fact there was very little else apart from the inevitable red river gums along the creeks. What wonderful trees they are, living five hundred to a thousand years with size and markings so stunning it would be a cold hearted passerby indeed who did not pause to admire them.

The towering Wilpena Pound was now slipping further behind. Soon it would be below my horizon. I was entering a different landscape of undulating hills that were so low the road went up and over them instead of around. The climbs did not constitute hard slogs but I found myself looking forward to the next bend and, hopefully, a crest.

I was about to start another long uphill climb when something quite unexpected happened. I was well into my stride, enjoying the solitude to the full, moving with the economical gait that had long been natural to me. There was no sound but the occasional bird call and the rhythmic crunching of my shoes. I think I was half hypnotized by the vast, cathedral-like silence with which I was surrounded.

'COO-EE.'

I stopped dead in my tracks. Like all bushies I'm familiar with 'Coo-ee'. But here?

I looked everywhere – behind me, up front, to the left and to the right. Then I looked again, searching the distant hills for sign of movement. The road was climbing slowly to a summit slightly higher than the others. There was no vehicle in sight, no other walkers, there were not even any sheep. Not that I would have expected a sheep to call coo-ee.

'COO-EE.'

I spun around, more alert this time. Following the direction of the call, my eyes travelled to the top of the hill to my left where, right at the top, silhouetted against the cloud, was a lone figure, all of two kilometres away. He or she seemed to be dressed in a long flowing robe – a bit like Moses or Lawrence of Arabia. I was still staring at him/her when he or she raised an arm and slowly waved.

I cupped my hands around my mouth: 'COO-EE.'

I must confess here that although I know all about how bushies call coo-ee to each other over great distances, this was the first time I'd heard the call in earnest. Before then, I'd only heard it in radio plays and the like. And I had certainly never called a coo-ee myself. So I was quite pleased when the figure gave me another wave, presumably indicating I had been heard. However, it then disappeared from view over the crest.

I had no idea what was going on, but my curiosity was now at breaking

point. The road did not appear to be heading to the hill, it seemed to be swinging to the right, but when I continued a little further it turned back to the left, towards the peak – and the source of the coo-ee. I came to a side road with a sign indicating two hundred metres to the hilltop. It also promised a good view.

Seeing three cars at the summit I unloaded my pack and made myself comfortable on the side of the road hoping to meet the person who had coo-eed. I had not been there long when the cars began snaking down the side road to the main road.

I scrambled to my feet and moved aside. As the cars drew level I half raised a hand in greeting and was about to begin a friendly smile when they swept past, turned right and headed south. I was left open-mouthed, eating their dust and with one hand at shoulder level like a policeman on point duty counting the minutes to the end of his shift. I thought they could have at least said 'G'day' and maybe discussed coo-ees, but these roosters acted as though they had just passed a pedestrian on a Sydney crosswalk.

Disappointed, I dusted myself down, harnessed up and resumed my walk, muttering dark things about people in cars.

The country continued to flatten, though there were still a few hills of significance. One to my right rose dramatically. This was Stokes Hill which is 750 metres high. It was three kilometres away by road, but the air was so clear I could see a four-wheel-drive parked at the top like one of those television commercials for off-road vehicles. I was tempted to make the climb myself, but it was too far.

About 2pm I came to a substantial airstrip. Oraparinna is in the middle of nowhere yet it has a well maintained gravel strip with lots of white cone markers and two bright yellow windsocks. There was a large shed – it could even have been a hangar – and parked outside was a light aircraft. I assumed the plane had flown people to Oraparinna Station or the Vulkathunha Gammon Ranges National Park headquarters, both ten kilometres up the road. There was nobody around. It took me fifteen minutes to walk the length of the airstrip.

A few kilometres further brought me to the turn-off for Arkaroola, one of my stopovers. But as I wanted to go to Blinman, I carried straight on. I would head east to Arkaroola after Blinman.

I had by now left the Flinders Ranges National Park and was in the Gammon Ranges National Park – which is a little confusing because I was still in the Flinders Ranges.

The Gammon Ranges park has some very rugged scenery and a wealth of Adnyamathana Aboriginal culture. There are also remnants of early European

settlement that briefly flourished then died in the harsh environment.

The ranger station comprised half a dozen buildings, and there were several four-wheel-drive vehicles parked around the place. It seemed, however, that everybody was out patrolling or doing whatever it is that rangers do in these places, because there was no sign of life.

I pulled up outside the office in the shade of a wide verandah next to the water tank, and took off the pack. I tried the office door but it was locked. Placing my hands over my eyes I peered through the window and saw tourist brochures on display. I walked around the other buildings, calling out but the silence was absolute. It was as quiet as a knocking shop on Mothers' Day.

I filled my water bottle from a rainwater tank and, after a thirty-minute break, I pressed on. I wondered if anybody would see my tracks and realise they'd had a visitor.

A few kilometres brought me to a roadside stop called Dingley Dell Campground. It had several tables under small roofs, bench seating, four rubbish bins and several displays describing the area's history and flora and fauna. I thought it one of the best roadside stops I had seen. I regretted having left the ranger station only a short while earlier because Dingley Dell would have been a delightful place to have a break and a look around.

At 4.30pm I reached the second road leading to Brachina Gorge. I had lost count of the number of people who had urged me to go there but I knew it would take me several days. Once again, it was out of the question. This, I decided, was the downside of walking. It was with some regret that I walked another few hundred metres to the dry bed of Enorama Creek – where my mood lifted. There was everything I needed for an overnight camp. Perfect, I thought. Then I worked out how far I had walked. Twenty-five kilometres! Not bad considering I had not got away until 10am. I decided that my fitness must be improving.

*

It was still raining when I woke up. It wasn't heavy rain, nor was it light rain. Steady, was the way I describe it. Reconciling myself to another enforced lie in, I began thinking of words for rain in order of severity. There was mist – not really rain but I kicked off with it anyway. Then there was mizzle. A lovely word, mizzle. It brought Scottish highlands to mind. Mizzle was followed by drizzle then there was light rain, medium rain, heavy rain, torrential rain, monsoonal rain … that was where I came to a standstill.

I dragged my mind back to the job in hand; I had a decision to make. I had carefully chosen excellent wet weather gear for this walk so why not use it? I had a long plastic top with a zippered front, a hood and big sealable pockets.

My long plastic pants had elastic at the ankles; even my backpack had a good waterproof cover. But I had tested none of this gear in the rain. I had taken to wearing the plastic top as protection against the morning cold, especially if there was a wind, but I had found it didn't breathe and that I was sweating after an hour's walking.

I was still pondering all of this when, soon after 7am, the rain stopped. There was a mist which made everything pretty damp but at least there was no precipitation. I crawled from the tent and checked the sky. It held little comfort for me – there were thunder clouds, it was blustery … it was ominous in every direction, with no hint of the sun.

I had pitched my tent near a big northern cypress which had such a dense canopy, the ground underneath was dry. I dragged out my pack and belly bag and put them under the tree, then I gathered together all my outside baggage such as the water bottles and solar panel – a fat lot of good that was going to be today! I pulled on my wet weather top and pants and started carrying all the gear from the tent to the pack. The tent's orange outer covering was drenched. I normally hang it over a fence or a tree limb to drip dry for twenty minutes but there was no point doing that today. I pushed it into its stuff-sack and placed a two-litre water bottle on top. Next I unclipped the reasonably dry tent from its frame and packed it away. Then I disassembled the tent framework, placed it in its cover and put it into the pack. The last things in were the ground sheet and its cover, followed by the radio gear (wrapped in its towel), the stuff-sack filled with 'general equipment', and finally, the food pack.

I now attached the two DBA flags, an empty two-litre water bottle and my thongs to the outside.

By this stage the mist had increased a notch to become a mizzle. Too bad. I strapped on the belly-bag and solar panel, struggled into the back pack harness, wriggled and shook like a dog after a swim to settle the weight, and checked the area for 'leftovers'. Then I took everything off again – I'd forgotten to put the bloody rain cover over the pack. Fortunately it had its own pocket in the pack's flip top, so I didn't have to unpack everything to get to it. The cover is bright blue and has elastic sides so that it hugs into the pack, keeping the rain out. At least that was the theory. Unfortunately, the designers had failed to take into account that some idiots carry flags on poles, water bottles, a ground mat and thongs strapped outside the pack. I now realised I should have packed the flags and bottle inside so I fitted the cover as snugly as possible, favouring the top to keep out any light rain and only half covering the ground mat. I thought it looked pretty good. It looked pretty anyway – that bright blue was very fetching.

I again hoisted the pack and, after another schizophrenic bout of shuddering and shaking, followed this time by a double pirouette, I steadied myself, took my bearings and headed off in the general direction of the Gulf of Carpentaria. It could rain, it could snow, it could do what the hell it liked, I was ready for anything.

Well, almost.

The road, you will recall, was gravel. Not any longer. It was now clay – thick, red, clinging clay. In considerably less than a minute I was ten centimetres taller, thanks to the oozing mess sticking to my boots. I was walking like a man in clogs. The only way of avoiding it was to move off the road where there was no clay but where the ground was uneven. I tried both sides and ended up changing between the two according to the conditions.

All my walking to date had been … well, walking. It is not an overly strenuous exercise, you lift one foot and place it in front of the other. It leaves you with all the time in the world to philosophise, theorise, fantasise or any other 'ise' you care to mention. You can walk and at the same time solve problems that have baffled entire civilisations. You can do all of these things when you are walking on a normal surface. You cannot do them walking on clay.

I now found myself totally absorbed with the problem of where to put my next foot. It would preferably be on a piece of road that was drier, harder, even stonier, than anywhere else. And while pondering this, my eyes would be scouting ahead for the easiest looking track. Would I stay on the crown where it should be drier, veer to the left where it appeared smoother, or go right where there was less moisture? And don't forget to check what it's like *off* the road – both sides, not one.

The wind began to rise. It wasn't strong yet but the blowing mizzle turned my hands blue with cold, forcing me to hold them behind the solar panel.

At 10.30am I crested a hill and saw a small notice board slightly off the road. It was protected by a corrugated iron roof which provided run-off to a little water tank immediately alongside. The notice board warned that fees applied for visitors and campers. It also advised that 750 metres away, up a slight hill, there was a historic shelter called 'Dead Man's Hut'. I could not for the life of me think of a more appropriate name.

What should I do?

I was by now drenched from head to toe. The rain had penetrated my protection gear around my waist, and what wasn't wet from that was soaked with perspiration from within my plastics. Water and sweat had run down into my boots so that my socks squelched with every step.

I decided on a morning tea break.

I pride myself on being able to make a decision but on this day I was torn between two choices. I could walk 750 metres to Dead Man's Hut and take my chances, or I could make for Ranger Tom's Gum Creek Station which, according to my map, was just five kilometres ahead. I guessed that Tom would have told his parents to expect me – but another five kilometres of clay! Dead Man's Hut was certainly closer – but the name wasn't exactly inviting. What had happened there?

'Pull yourself together,' I said. 'What's it to be, Dead Man's hut where there could be anything or nothing, or Gum Creek Station where there might be a hot shower and warm bed?'

That did it. Gum Creek Station.

The 'traffic' continued at about two vehicles an hour, usually four-wheel-drives towing caravans. Most drove straight past without even moving to one side, but others stopped and offered me water ('No thanks') or a lift ('No thanks'). When I heard them coming I moved off the road, the weight of the pack forcing me to take mincing little strides. I was moving like Madam Butterfly. The cars roared past throwing sheets of mud, their windscreen wipers working overtime.

By the time I reached the Gum Creek Station turnoff I had figured out what my approach would be: I would ask if I could shelter for half an hour. They, out of the generosity of their big country hearts, would offer a dry place to camp – or perhaps even a room. The very thought of it made me quicken my pace.

Slipping and slithering I made the half kilometre to the homestead. Under a double carport was a four-wheel-drive one-tonne ute with an empty bay next to it. There were no barking dogs.

I dropped the pack, took off my 'wets' and spread them over the ute's tray to drip. Next, I scuffed thick layers of clay from my boots – a waste of time because by the time I reached the garden gate they were clogged up again.

'ANYONE HOME?'

My voice echoed around the buildings without attracting a response. There was no sedan car in the carport – maybe they were out. I went from building to building calling out but it was becoming increasingly obvious that I had the place to myself. Returning to the carport, I found an upturned milk crate and sat down to await their return. It was 12.30pm and although Blinman was only twelve kilometres away and well within reach, I did not feel like getting that wet gear on again and doing another three hours' slogging. If I could dry out at Gum Creek overnight, perhaps the road would be drier tomorrow.

I sat waiting for twenty minutes. Then the doubts started creeping in. What if they didn't come back today? They could be in Brisbane as far as I knew.

Tom had said I would be welcome and that he would probably be here this afternoon or tonight. But what if he didn't come? If nobody turned up I couldn't sleep here, it's not the way things are done out here. I would have to camp outside their gate.

After what seemed a long time I gave in and, pulling on my wet plastics, wet belly bag, wet solar panel and pack, and dragging down my dripping hood, I stepped out into the rain and headed back towards the main road.

I had been walking for what seemed hours when I saw a settlement directly ahead. Blinman. I thought: 'Thank God for that.' It struck me that coming from an atheist it was pointless expression of gratitude but I couldn't think of anybody else to thank. It didn't matter – my one-foot-after-another technique had paid dividends. I could almost smell a warm fire and a hamburger and onions.

I have seldom been so disappointed. It wasn't Blinman, it was Apana Station and it was off to the left. I sagged under the weight of my load, more defeated than tired. Then I brightened – I was on bitumen again. That enabled me to dig deep and to press on.

I passed the turn-off to Wirrealpa Station and remembered Warren Fargher at the Rawnsley Park opera, and his pressing invitation to 'drop in'. I could be heading there tomorrow; it was thirty-four kilometres away. And from there it was just a hundred kilometres to Arkaroola Resort Caravan Park. They were relatively easy stages. If only I could get out of this blasted rain.

More buildings appeared ahead. I didn't think it was Blinman because they appeared to be in small scattered groups like Apana but not as big. They turned out to be the small town's 'outer suburbs', just small holdings of about four hectares.

I passed a sign that was facing back the way I had come and displaying road conditions to various places. I could see that the road I was on had not been updated, but maybe four-wheel-drives could handle it. More importantly, I knew that such signs were normally placed close to a town. I must be nearly there.

There was a dip in the road where it crossed a wide dry creek bed then it swung to the right into the main street of Blinman. The description 'main street' is a little pretentious here – it was the only street – however, there was a general store, a sort of post office, pub, caravan park and camping area, a school, library and a couple of private houses. It was tempting to wonder if all of these businesses depended on the occupants of the two houses for a living.

It was still raining when I propped under the pub verandah and started the familiar routine of unloading. The pub was a single storey building of

classical colonial architecture with a big green sign on the roof: North Blinman Hotel. Its walls were rendered and painted cream and on the verandah was a bench and a couple of tables and chairs. There were more tables and chairs to one side of the building for 'alfresco dining' but when I arrived, everything was beaded with moisture. Parked outside were eight four-wheel-drives, all mud-splattered and dripping brown water.

I was taking all of this in when the door to the public bar opened and somebody poked his head outside.

'Wanna beer, mate? Yer look like yer could use one!'

'Thanks, I'd love one and probably need one but I signed the pledge years ago.' Not wanting to lose the moment I said, 'But I'd love a coffee.'

'Done. And a hamburger, I'll bet.'

'Sure, thanks.' I was almost overwhelmed by his thoughtfulness. He had seen me through the misty window and summed me up in a trice. He disappeared inside to place the order but he was immediately replaced by another two blokes from inside the bar.

'Saw you on the road,' says one of them. 'You collecting for charity or something?'

I pointed to the logo on my T-shirt. 'DeafBlind.'

With that he handed over a five dollar note and his mate threw in a tenner. Then they headed for their vehicles. 'I reckon you deserve it,' said the bloke who had given me the tenner.

I called out, 'Would you like a receipt?'

'Nah, you're right, mate.'

'I'll put them on a general receipt for Blinman,' I shouted. They started their cars and drove away, their windscreen wipers working.

The 'Wanna beer, mate' bloke reappeared, this time with ten dollars in his hand. 'Name's Richard,' he said. 'Coffee's waiting for you inside. You look shit.' He handed over the tenner, climbed into his car and followed the other two.

If I was overwhelmed before, I was now bowled over. I went inside where an Aussie bloke behind the bar said, 'Here's your coffee, mate. It's paid for.' He thrust out a hand the size of beef steak. 'Tom said you was comin' but we didn't expect you today. He and Lisa was here for dinner last night. I'm Tom's brother-in-law. She's pretty miserable out there, mate. You better stay in a room.'

I had not had time to thank him, never mind take it all in, before he disappeared round the back.

I sipped on the hot coffee. Jeez, it was good. I could feel it warming me all the way down. I was still sipping and savouring when he came back.

'Take room one,' he said, handing me a key on an oversized tag. 'It's just

across the road. Come back when you're ready – cook starts at six. You've got a hamburger and chips coming.'

I guess I mumbled my thanks – I'm sure I would have – but I don't remember doing it. I felt as though I'd been engulfed by a willy-willy.

Sip … savour … sip... I finished the steaming coffee and was about to say thanks again but Tony gave a backhand flick of his hand which said, 'Get to your room and out of those dripping clothes.'

Gratefully I crossed the road with my gear and found the room. The door closed behind shutting out the wind and rain. It was so cosy in there. I switched the air conditioning to 'heat' mode, pulled everything out of my pack and spread it out to dry. What a mess. Everything was wet: the receipt book, the sat phone manual, every piece of clothing, my shoes and socks. I propped the shoes against the wall, stripped off and headed for the shower.

Oh, the luxury of a hot shower! I could feel myself thawing out. I could feel the soreness easing under the needles of hot water. I don't know how long I stayed under that shower. When I eventually dragged myself out I found a fluffy towel on the end of the bed and rubbed myself dry until my skin felt as though it were aglow.

If I'd been a cat the sight of the bed would have had me purring. I had a lie down for ten minutes then forced myself to get up. I think if I'd stayed longer I would have slept until morning, and I couldn't do that – the cook was starting at six and there was a hamburger to attend to.

I found my thongs, picked through my underwear and selected the driest pair of jocks. It was like pulling on wet bathers. Remarkably, the shorts I had been wearing were damp around the waist but otherwise pretty dry. My Husky walking shirt which I'd hung in front of the air conditioner air flow was also reasonably dry. Thus attired, I grabbed my wallet and dashed through the rain to the pub. I knew I wasn't the best dressed man in town but at least I was more presentable than when I'd arrived.

I saw a public phone near the office and decided to ring Bill to bring him up to date with what had been happening, and to let him know that I was safe and in excellent company. I told him there would be no radio sched tonight but promised to ring again in the morning with more details of events since leaving Rawnsley Park.

My hamburger and chips were up to expectations; mind you, the hamburger could have been from a week-old camel road-kill and it would have tasted good to me. I wanted to stay in the bar and mingle with the small crowd but I was pooped and I kept thinking of that bed. So I said my early 'good nights' and plodded back across the road, my clothes now dry.

I thought I'd be asleep in seconds but my mind was racing with the day's events. I had my radio on and it was midnight before I drifted off.

*

It was very warm when I woke up which made me think that the weather had improved. It was still dark outside and when I checked my thermometer I saw that it was twenty-six degrees. Then the air conditioner cut in again. I had left it running all night on 'heat'. I felt guilty, I hate wasting electricity, but when I checked my gear I found that it was now only damp, rather than wringing wet. I still felt guilty – but then I looked through the window and saw the rain. That helped ease my conscience.

I took out my electrical equipment and put the sat phone on charge. It would take about an hour then I would charge up the other batteries.

I straightened the bed, had a quick shower and pulled on some warm, crumpled clothes. Next, I sat on the bed and reached for my diary.

I am not a 'diary person' but Bill had insisted I keep one. He had also persuaded me to take the camera and, later, a voice recorder. I'd had vague ideas of somebody writing a book on my journey which was why I spent more than an hour writing up as much detail as I could remember on the previous day's experiences.

After breakfast in my room I set out to explore Blinman. The 'post office,' I discovered, was not of the normal city or suburban variety, however, it sported a sign on the door stating that 'mail lodgements' were attended to.

At the general store I bought some fruit and introduced myself to Tom's wife, Lisa. Their son Bailey showed a keen interest in what I was doing and was full of questions about my gear. Months later he emailed me for more information as he was writing up my walk as a school project.

Next along the road was an unoccupied miner's log cottage which was built in 1864. It had recently been sold and I was delighted to learn that there were plans to restore it to how it had been 144 years ago.

Then came the school, a brick building which opened in 1872 with ninety-five students. It closed in 1980 which was hardly surprising – Blinman's present population numbered just twenty. When I was there the building had been turned into the Wild Lime Café and Art Gallery where owners Robyn Holtham and Phil Matthews also provided an internet service. This was good news – I could catch up with my email. An hour later I returned to the hotel to enquire about laundry facilities.

I met John, a handyman and friend or relative of the owners, whose claim to fame was his ability to clean out the general store's iced coffee supply. He performed this feat so frequently the store was continually forced to bring in

emergency supplies. I reckoned I had the record for the most iced coffees in one day but he was better than me. John showed me where the pub washing machines and dryers were and told me to help myself.

After finishing my washing I hung around the pub for a while chatting to two young couples in four-wheel-drives who were about to head off across the Simpson Desert. They had met up by chance and had decided to 'buddy-up' for safety. One couple was from France and heading into the outback for the first time. The other pair comprised an Aussie bloke and a girl from England. They were all interested in my HF radio gear – they had hired similar radios at top prices and were not happy with the coverage. They were good company and we ate lunch together in the bar. Mine was a juicy steak with chips.

After lunch Tony introduced his wife Maureen. We discussed the weather for a while and they reckoned I should stay another night. They got no resistance from me; my backpack was still damp and there was no sign of a let-up with the rain. And I had already made up my mind that there would be no more walking in the wet unless absolutely necessary.

*

Next morning was all drizzle and wind. No sun, no blue sky, just grey bleak cloud. I was the only one in Blinman without a smile on his face – they needed the rain, the area had been declared drought-affected for years. Put into that context, my enforced stay was a small price to pay. There was a Blinman joke:

Traveller to young boy: 'Does it ever rain around here?'

Young boy: 'Don't ask me, I'm only seven.'

Meanwhile, most of my gear was now reasonably dry. My shoes were still damp and my pack felt that way as well, but maybe it just needed a good airing.

I had breakfast at the pub and, although it was still early, Tony said, 'You'd better plan on having breakfast with us again tomorrow.'

Trying not to sound overly disappointed, I said, 'How long do you think it will last?'

'We need the rain,' he said. 'You keep the rain coming down and you can stay here a month.'

I got the message.

When people are generous to me I always try to give something in return but whenever I asked Tony if there was anything he needed fixed, he always brushed the offer aside, saying, 'You're right, mate. Go and have your breakfast,' or whatever.

While I was at the store I let Lisa know that I was available to talk to school kids about the walk, and I suggested a 'workshop' for adults to discuss

computing and the internet. I also struck up a conversation with Dudley, a local bloke with a four-wheel-drive, which he referred to as 'the old bugger' and which looked as though it had spent most of its life working in paddocks. When he complained that the old bugger was a bugger to start on cold mornings, I said I would have a look at it if he would bring it to the store the next day.

The drizzle stopped about 4pm and I began looking around for somewhere to sling the radio antenna so that I could contact Bill and Roger. I could have used the public telephone or even email but I wanted to test my radio again. I found two trees on either side of a dirt road which gave second access to the caravan park, and decided they would have to do. There were no patrons in the caravan park and the road was obviously little-used.

I tossed the cord over the trees, ran the antenna across the road and returned to my room for the radio, feeder cable and battery. I was on my way back, whistling happily to myself, when a four-wheel-drive appeared out of nowhere. I yelled out and the driver skidded to a halt just short of the antenna, doubtless wondering what in hell he'd done wrong. Realising it would have done no damage to the aerial even if he had run over it, I quickly calmed down and explained to the perplexed driver what I was doing. We met in the hotel dining room later that night and had a long chat.

Being a Saturday, there was a good crowd in the pub, all playing pool, watching television and, of course, discussing the weather. Before going to bed I determined to have another crack at getting on to Sunday's 'Australia All Over'. I would head for the public telephone at 5am and hang in for as long as it took.

*

I slept in. Bugger it! It was six o'clock when I woke up. I knew the show started at 5.30am but it was already 8am in Sydney. I had gathered from listening to the show that you have a better chance of getting on if you ring between six and seven; call outside those times, and you can wait forever.

Undeterred I pulled on shorts and T-shirt and a plastic top and headed for the phone. I would have preferred the public phone in the pub where it was warm and there was a chair and table, but they didn't open up until 9am.

I called the 1300 number and was surprised when I got straight through to Kelly, the producer. She remembered me immediately from the opera at Rawnsley Park but she slipped straight into an apology: the cricket was being broadcast and the show was not going to air.

I noticed on my way back to my room that the rain had stopped though it was still heavily overcast. I crawled back into my warm bed and read a novel I had picked up at the general store's 'cheap box'.

When I discussed the weather with Tony in the kitchen (he was cook that morning) we agreed that the rain seemed to be passing, but he insisted I stay another night and make up my mind in the morning. It was very generous of him but I couldn't help wondering if he and his mates thought that I had brought the rain and that it might stop if I left.

After breakfast I logged in to the internet at the café and replied to several emails. The satellite weather map showed that the Blinman area was under the influence of a massive weather cell which was moving slowly south-east, and that its trailing edge was directly over us. Promising, I thought. Sure enough, by 2pm there were patches of blue sky and I was able to bring out my pack and shoes for airing.

I lashed out that night and dined on chicken schnitzel with chips and salad. I caught up with Tony before turning in and offered him payment for my room but he would not hear of it. I thanked him for his generosity and told him I would be away in the morning.

I finished my novel in bed. It wasn't a bad yarn but I prefer something a bit more challenging – make that, technical.

I was by now so well rested I fell asleep looking forward to getting some more clay on my boots.

*

Blinman's drought-breaking rain disappeared overnight. A clear, cloudless sky now smiled on the land with such promise of warmth even the town's dogs were sleeping in. There was not a bark to be heard, nor was there movement. Everybody, it seemed, was making the most of a lovely morning by staying indoors.

I finished my packing and made my last minute checks to make sure I was leaving nothing behind. As I left the room I felt a momentary pang of regret. I had arrived looking like a drowned rat and this room had played a vital role in getting me back on track. It had been my refuge and now I was leaving its heater and comfortable bed and hot shower for who knows what?

I strapped on my belly bag and solar panel, hefted on my backpack, walked thirty metres across the road and took them all off again. I needed to say goodbye to Tony and Maureen, and I could see John the yardman on the verandah enjoying a smoke and his first iced coffee of the day. Tony had allowed me to leave a collection tin on the end of the bar for a few days and I needed to empty it and leave a receipt.

Leaving my gear on the verandah I took more photographs and, wandering down the street, I found a plaque which revealed that Blinman had the distinction of being the highest gazetted town in South Australia – its

altitude is 610 metres above sea level. I guess that's not high by the standards of most countries but I couldn't help wondering if the walking was going to be all downhill for a while. I discovered that copper had been found in Blinman in 1859 and that in 1918, the town's population had peaked at 1500. I also learnt that William Kekwick, who was second-in-command on several of John McDouall Stuart's explorations, was buried nearby. He died on a South Australian Government-sponsored expedition through the area in 1872. He was forty-eight, and he left a wife and four children. It must have been a hard life but I felt sure that if I had lived in that era I would have joined just such an expedition.

It was 8.15am before the citizens of Blinman began emerging into the sunlight. Fifteen minutes later I was in the general store enjoying an iced coffee.

The pub doors opened at 9am and I had a final chat with Tony before emptying the collection tin – $90.50. Not bad for such a small town. I handed the room key to Tony who again refused to accept any payment. I shook his hand, gave him a weak Aussie hug, hitched on my pack and headed out of town with a warm feeling in my heart and a tear in my eye.

I covered the two kilometres back along the bitumen then turned on to the road to Wirrealpa Station, thirty-five kilometres away. Of course it was gravel but it was surprisingly hard and there were no puddles. I was relieved; now that I'd started I didn't really want my boot soles clogged with clay again. The road headed east (more or less), winding through low hills with side roads leading off to the left and right every kilometre or so.

At 11am I stopped for a break and sent off my noon (EST) position to Bill. That done, I took out my map, mainly, I think because the countryside looked interesting. It wasn't just the hills and creek beds it was the number of mines, nearly all of them abandoned. Most were marked on my map – and they had such interesting names: Carey Hill, Wheal Butler, Ango, Eregunda. How much jubilation and desolation had these places known, I wondered?

The road worked its way clockwise around the base of First Hill where I had planned to set up camp. However, I had been late getting away from Blinman and my pace was definitely slower than before the deluge; four days of soft living had taken their toll. So when I came across a good spot for my tent with a couple of trees for my antenna and an abundance of firewood, I weakened.

Later in the evening, when my fire was crackling nicely and I'd had my soup and noodles and a cup of coffee, I stretched out on the ground, gazed up at a heaven full of stars and congratulated myself on my choice of lifestyle.

*

There was still a faint glow of life among my campfire's embers next morning. After a quick visit behind a bush I checked my thermometer which confirmed my suspicion that it was chilly – eleven degrees chilly. I broke some dead twigs off a bush, got down on all fours and piled the twigs in the campfire's ashes. I was rewarded with a thin plume of smoke and when I blew gently on the ashes there was a faint crackling sound followed immediately by flame licking hungrily at the twigs. I gathered more wood and in less than a minute I had a decent fire. However, it was still too cold to pack up and, as I knew I would be in Wirrealpa in less than four hours, I returned to my still-warm sleeping bag to watch the flames.

I always position my tent upwind from my fire to minimise the risk of damage from flying embers. The siliconised nylon is not particularly flammable but it is thin and easily holed. I also pitch the tent in a clear area away from any bushes. If I am in an area of dead grass I either do without a fire or pitch the tent on the road verge or perhaps a side road. I also do without a fire if there is a strong wind and there are dead leaves around.

Guided more by my thermometer than my watch, I waited until the temperature reached fifteen degrees then started the business of packing up and making sure the fire was safe.

The easiest way of doing this is to douse it with water or, if there is no water, to bury it. However, as I have neither water nor shovel I have to do it the hard way. I choose my firewood carefully, making sure there are no big branches still burning when I'm ready to go. I scatter the ashes over an area about the size of a card table and rub the still-burning sticks vigorously together and into the ground, removing any hot parts. These, I leave well away from any hot coals. If I have any doubts about any smouldering embers, I scuff them with my shoes until they are safe to leave. It's quite a business but there are no shortcuts; station people do not take kindly to campers whose campfires have started bushfires.

By 8.30am I was moving along at a healthy lick. My GPS can show my speed and I was pleased to note that for the first three hours I was doing 5 km/h. Walking at this speed soon builds up the body temperature which is not a bad thing on cold mornings. However, I knew I wouldn't be able to keep it up all day; by midday I would probably be down to 4 or 3.5 km/h and eventually 3 km/h. That was when I was just putting one foot in front of the other with everything on automatic. But even at that speed I was covering six kilometres every two hours. I was covering half the day's distance by 11am and the rest between then and about 4.30pm.

I came to what could only be described as a 'major intersection'. The track

at this point was wide enough for two cars to pass comfortably and, as it swung gradually to the left, there was another equally wide track leading off to the right at right angles. As I said, a major intersection. One sign said 'Wilpena 82km' – it was where I would have come out if I had not gone to Blinman. I shuddered at the thought of covering that distance soaking wet and with no roof over my head.

Another faded sign said 'Wirrealpa 1'. This was a surprise, I hadn't realised I was so close. There were no markers along the track indicating every five kilometres, and I didn't have an odometer attached to my boot, so establishing my position was largely a matter of guesswork. My GPS would tell me my distance from my last camp (I noted my position in my diary every night) but I don't leave it on because it flattens my batteries. Of course, I could have worked out the distance by consulting my watch, but I hadn't worn one since the last one died twenty years ago. Also, there are clocks on my satellite phone, camera or GPS but because they are always packed away in difficult-to-reach places, I don't usually consult them. My problem was that I'd lost track of the time.

Taking all this into account, I had a good hard look at the sign and confirmed that the figure displayed was indeed a 'one'. Still unconvinced I took my camera from my belly bag, turned it on and found to my surprise that it was already 11.30am. I looked around, mystified. There was no windmill, no radio mast, in fact nothing to suggest that there was a homestead in the immediate vicinity. The sign was telling me to turn right and walk another kilometre to Wirrealpa, yet I distinctly remembered Warren, the station boss, telling me at the opera that it was on the main road. Maybe he meant the four-wheel-drive road and not the one used by walkers.

I struck off towards Wirrealpa as the sign suggested and had gone no more than fifty metres when I came to another sandy track heading off to my right, back the way I had come on the main road. A good-sized sign on two posts alongside this track proclaimed 'WIRREAPLA'. On the other side was another sign: 'NO THROUGH ROAD'. I assumed that we must all have been right – the homestead was just off the main road but out of sight.

A little further and some out-buildings appeared; I approached them through trees and across undulating land. I went through an open gate and past a shearing shed and a cluster of buildings of early-settler architecture that were obviously still in use. However, there were no vehicles, machinery or people – there were not even any dogs. There was a circle of six or seven chairs around a dead fire and I could see a barbecue off to one side. The indications were that a number of people lived there; the question was where the hell were they? There were several garbage bins with plastic liners and the ground

was flat and bare as though well trodden. I had found the Australian outback's equivalent to the *Mary Celeste!*

Still with my pack on and turning constantly so as not to miss anything, I followed some well-used wheel tracks to a dry creek bed. Climbing up the other side I saw another building about 150 metres away. At first glance it appeared to be a small structure but as I walked out of a dip in the track, it developed into a low broad homestead surrounded by gum trees, a suburban-style fence with a gate, and a well-tended lawn and rose garden.

If I thought I'd stumbled across a *Mary Celeste* before, I now blinked my eyes to make sure I wasn't entering Paradise.

Snapping myself out of my dream, I yelled, 'ANYONE HOME?'

All hell broke loose. The dogs, startled from their mid-afternoon snooze, vented their anger and guilt in a cacophony of hysterical barking. They were somewhere behind me, and I didn't know whether to go through the gate and close it behind me or wait to find out whether they were german shepherds or fox terriers. My in-built fear of strange alarmed dogs took over and, abandoning any attempt at dignity, I dashed to the gate, slammed it shut behind me and turned to meet the slavering onslaught. I was relieved to see the dogs behind a secure wire enclosure, fifty metres away.

I heard a screen door close and, turning back to the homestead, I was again struck by a feeling of unreality. The house was like something out of *Home Beautiful* with hanging flower baskets and outdoor furniture on a wide patio, the roses and lawn in stark contrast to the barren backdrop. Walking towards me was a woman I assumed was Warren's wife. She was as neat as a pin, every bit the upper-class home-maker.

'Can I help you?' she asked suspiciously.

I was a little taken aback, then I remembered: I was dusty and dishevelled, I had a fly-net over my face, a solar panel hanging around my neck and I was sporting a month-old beard.

If Wirrealpa has any annals my reply must surely find a place: 'Oh, G'day. I … er … I met Warren at the opera and he asked me to drop in.'

Her eyes narrowed slightly. 'Warren is out on the station … but he'll be back shortly,' she added, just a little too quickly.

Who could blame her? She was alone in the house – and what would a scruffy-looking bloke under a fly-net and a solar panel be doing at the opera? I stood there not knowing what to do.

Coming to my rescue, she said, 'Why don't you take your pack off and have a look around?' She pointed towards a hill. 'There's a trig point up there. It's a great view.'

Smart lady. She was telling me how I could fill in my time without having to invite me into the house. I certainly didn't blame her for that.

Indicating that I could leave my pack on the patio, she said, 'Would you like something to drink?'

'Oh, no thanks, I'm right. I'll just drop my gear and have a look around.' I took out my camera and headed back through the gate. This started the dogs going again. They were in an enclosure near a chook pen where half a dozen hens were scratching the dirt for grubs.

As I headed towards the hill I came to a bench the size of a dining room table, with a one-metre diameter saw blade protruding through the middle. Its safety cover was a half-tyre. There was also a 300mm-diameter pulley that would take a belt driven by a tractor's 'power take-off'. Off to the back and sides of the workbench were a pile of tree limbs and a stack of cut logs. There would be no cold winter nights in this homestead.

The machinery shed was the width of six garages. Inside was an unregistered Land Rover with the bonnet up and a water-bag hanging off the bull bar. This, I decided, would be the bush-basher for rough work in difficult country. There was also a trail bike and a quad bike. In the old days the mustering would have been done by stockmen on horseback. I poked my head into the shed – everything was in its place. The workshop had a pit and was equipped with welding gear and the tools were neatly arranged. I was starting to like this place.

My nose was still in Warren's shed (where it shouldn't have been) when I spotted and immediately recognised electronic control cabinets for the homestead's electricity. But these were not the diesel generator type of switchboard, these were electronic. The solar array panel was massive. I had helped maintain three 50-watt solar panels on Evan's houseboat and they were considered big but this one had a row of eighteen panels on the shed's roof.

I stepped back and circled the shed. There was another bank of eighteen panels behind the first one. Thirty-six 50-watt panels! That was a massive 1800-watts or 1.8 kilowatts.

I was impressed – the station was running on solar power. I was itching to find out more. Hopefully there would be some work for me and I could stay a day or two.

I found a five-tonne truck which once was red, with sheep cages on the back. It was parked under a fig tree. At first glance I thought it was station junk but closer inspection revealed that the tyres were inflated and in good condition, and that the window I had assumed was missing, was just wound down. The bull bar needed a coat of paint and the vehicle wasn't registered, but

it didn't need to be – it would be used only on the station for moving sheep. This truck was like me, I decided. Old but functional.

On the way to the trig hill I came across a grave and its white marble headstone, surrounded by a low fence. The inscription was old and faded:

In loving memory of
FRANCIS HOWARD DUFFIELD

The bottom line was obscured by dead grass but I could see the date 1922. I wanted to step over the fence and move the grass but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Francis Duffield had been the station manager. Now he rests in peace in the most pleasant of surroundings.

The trig point, a pyramid of rocks supporting a tall stick, could be seen for kilometres. It had been painstakingly positioned by early surveyors calculating from previous known trig points and then all the way back to Adelaide. This trig point had been used as a reference for surveying the immediate area and other trig points beyond. I am well aware of their existence and I always keep an eye out for them. There had been one on a hill overlooking Blinman which showed up in one of my photographs. Today, these trig points are something of an anachronism; I don't need them for navigation, and surveyors don't use them any more because GPS is more accurate.

On my way back to the homestead, at the foot of the hill, I found another gravestone, also white marble but with a more ornamental fence of hooped wire, strengthened with metal rails. The inscription on the well-maintained headstone told a sad little story:

In
Loving Memory
Of
Katherine
Infant daughter of
T.D. & K. Phillips
Aged 4 Months

I thought of the lack of medical care and the distance from the nearest hospital. I stood for a few moments, feeling for baby Katherine and her saddened parents.

I was about to start back for the homestead when I heard a couple of vehicles approaching. Warren was in one, a young couple in the other. When

Warren stepped out of his vehicle I was there, shaking his hand.

'I thought you weren't coming or got lost,' he said. 'How are ya?'

'Yeah, good. I got stuck in Blinman with the rain. Did you get it here as well?'

'It was more thunder and lightning, but we got a bit. This is my son John and his friend Anna.'

Warren waved his hand. 'C'mon on in. We'll have some lunch and you can tell us what you've been up to.'

I jumped into Warren's car and we returned to the homestead where I was introduced to his wife Barbara, the lady I had seen earlier. The table was set, including a place for me. Smart lady.

Over lunch I learnt that John was studying law at Adelaide University and that he and Anna, who was on a working holiday, were helping out at Wirrealpa for a week. The station, which offers farm-stay accommodation, was hosting twenty-eight Asian students studying English in Adelaide. Barbara, with help from the others, was doing the catering while the group used the station as a base to visit places nearby. It explained why the out-buildings I had seen had an occupied look.

When I offered my services to Warren he immediately accepted. He said he had a two-man job planned for the afternoon and if I went with him, it would release John for something else.

With lunch over, Warren and I climbed into a four-wheel-drive ute. Gingerly, I moved a rifle fitted with a telescopic sight out of harm's way. I'm okay with guns, I'm even a reasonable shot with a .22, but they make me nervous and I treat them with great respect. We followed faintly-defined tracks to a distant windmill. The task in hand was to paint the blades silver, making them easily visible from the air.

Wirrealpa sprawls over 1650 square kilometres and Warren covers it mainly in his Cessna 172 light aircraft. Say it quickly and 1650 square kilometres doesn't sound much but by my reckoning, it makes Wirrealpa about the size of Sydney, home to four million people. Wirrealpa's permanent population numbers two.

You may not think that painting a windmill's blades takes two people, but it is a dangerous job requiring one person (in this case, me) to be on standby. Warren is a good manager who adheres to work-safe practices, and painting windmills certainly demands care. Putting on a safety harness (I had never before seen a station worker take this precaution) he climbed up to a small platform, held the disk with his left hand to stop it spinning and, hanging on with his legs, did the painting with his right hand. Because the platform

was so small he could paint only one side of the blades in the normal way. To paint the other side, he had to reach around and paint blind. Because he was unable to see where he had painted, it was up to me call out instructions such as: 'Up a bit … over to the right … no, no, your right … that's it. Okay, next one.' With eighteen vanes to be painted, it was exhausting, time-consuming work. Incidentally, my other job was to take his broken body back to Barbara if he fell from the ladder.

When the windmill was finished, and its blades were gleaming in the sunshine, we packed up and headed for another one. On the way Warren explained that there was good subterranean water only seven metres down, and that a well dug in the 1800s was still there. It seemed incongruous that this parched land needed windmill pumps to support sheep when there was an ocean of water within digging distance.

With windmill number two sporting a new coat of paint you would be excused for thinking it had been a good day's work, and that it was time to knock off. Not so.

Warren had been shanghaied into giving his Asian visitors a shearing demonstration, and four 'woollies' (sheep which had missed out on the last shearing muster) were already awaiting their fate in the shearing shed yard. It was all part of the farm-stay experience. Warren, who had maintained the old diesel and belt-driven shearing equipment, and was skilled in using it, now addressed the visitors, explaining the workings of a shearing shed. He showed them the wool press, the wool classing tables and the storage bins. He explained how the rouseabout gathered the fleece from the floor at the shearers' feet and spread it on the classing table, and how they picked off the burrs and low-quality bits of wool from the edges – the belly and crutch areas. He showed them how the wool classer moved along the tables, deciding the quality of the fibre and telling the rouseabout which bin to put it in. When one of the bins was full, the fleeces were placed in two halves of the press, and the wool compressed into one side containing the bag to a final weight of 100 to 200 kilograms.

With his audience now in the palm of his hand, Warren dragged in his sheep and expertly sheared them. When it was all over the wide-eyed students were each given a sample of the wool. It could not have been received more reverently if it had been gold.

I told them I was about to set up my radio antenna and make some calls, and invited them to stay back and watch. The response was somewhat underwhelming – nobody stayed back. Compared to sheep shearing my antenna-raising skills did not measure on the Richter Scale.

Dinner that night was like the feeding of the multitude. Barbara had

cooked a huge amount of spaghetti-bol which we took to the dining hall in the back of a station vehicle. All the visitors filed past the steaming bowls for generous serves which they took back to the long tables. With appetites sharpened by a day in the bush, they polished off their first serves and quickly returned for seconds. Then they came back for sweets and coffee.

There was a good kitchen area next to the dining room where we kitchen hands washed, wiped and stacked with a will.

My work done, I retired to the room I had been allocated next to Dennis the tour bus driver and, after a hot shower, I crashed on my sleeping bag.

*

Some days start full of promise and this was one of them. I would be working alongside the Wirrealpa family on their cattle and sheep station (and I could think of nothing I would rather do), and I would be helping look after the station's Asian visitors. I spent a minute or two savouring these twin delights before emerging energetically from my room and hurrying to the shower**.**

By the time I reached the dining room, Barbara and Warren had the breakfast things laid out ready for delivery. We loaded everything on to the back of the four-wheel-drive tray-back and drove carefully to the visitors' quarters where a few early Asian starters were kicking a football around. The less energetic were drifting out of their rooms, still rubbing sleep from their eyes. I guessed they had been up until the early hours discussing the strange land in which they had found themselves.

Working in a kitchen this size was, for me, a new experience. I had eaten in camp messes before but this was the first time I'd been in the engine room. Breakfast on this day was a relatively simple meal – fruit juices, cereals, toast, jams, tea and coffee – but the action behind scenes was frenetic. There were only thirty people to feed but it could have been a battalion of infantry as far as I was concerned. There were jugs of juice to be refilled, dishes and eating utensils to be washed and dried – and it seemed that every second person was an expert on the toaster. It was as bad as being put in charge of the keg after a football grand final – everybody wanted to adjust the equipment.

The main topic of conversation was a proposed joy ride in a light aircraft from the Wirrealpa strip to the start of the Flinders Ranges. About half the guests were going and it was they who were contributing most to the hubbub. The pilot would be a neighbour, Ian, who had a licence to carry commercial passengers. Warren could carry only non-paying passengers.

My job was to pile the students into a stock transport cage on the back of a four-wheel-drive ute, and drive them to the airstrip just over a kilometre away.

It has to be remembered that these young people were straight out of Asia and with no concept of the Australian bush. Most were from crowded, air-polluted cities; they had probably never seen a live sheep or cow, while their contact with nature had more than likely been limited to a walk in a park. I leave you to imagine the thrill they experienced simply from riding in the back of a ute along a two-tyre track road, that plunged down into a dry creek bed and up the opposite bank. Astronauts could not have experienced a bigger adrenalin rush on blast-off. The more we bumped and swayed, the louder the shrieks of delight. I was tempted to show off a bit and treat them to some real bush driving but better judgment prevailed.

I pulled up on the airstrip and unloaded my passengers, all of whom were grinning ear-to-ear. Their feet had no sooner touched the ground when Ian landed and taxied across to our group.

The first problem was deciding who would take the first flight. Negotiations over this issue were as vocal as they were prolonged and would probably have taken up much of the morning had Ian not stepped in, pointed at three people and said, 'You, you and you.' His settlement of the impasse may have lacked the subtlety of a United Nations decree, but was infinitely more effective. The designated three climbed into the aircraft, two in the back and one in the front, leaving Ian to hoist himself into the cockpit and prepare for take-off. I tried to move the others away from the plane but they were reluctant to move. I couldn't work out whether it was because they wanted to be as close as possible to the airstrip or were afraid of missing out on the next flight.

I cleared them back long enough for Ian to taxi away, and was still trying to shepherd them back from the centre-line, when the Cessna roared over our heads at an altitude of about five metres.

'Aaaargh,' said my flock, clicking their cameras. 'Aaaargh.'

Ian gave his passengers and earth-bound, wide-eyed audience a mini air show, climbing a straight line and turning a little more steeply than usual. He was well within flying regulations but he was making one hell of an impression on his young visitors. I imagined them going back to Tokyo or wherever they were from, and telling the story like trainee kamikaze pilots.

We watched the Cessna dissolve into a speck as it headed towards the Flinders Ranges, finally disappearing into the infinite blue of the Australian sky. The excited babble continued and was just showing signs of abating when, fifteen minutes later, I heard the plane returning. I still couldn't see it but I pointed in the general direction of the hills, urging everybody to keep a sharp look out. They stopped their talking, shielded their eyes with their hands and began searching the sky like air wardens on red alert. Still nothing.

The Cessna appeared without warning from behind some trees and, with engine bellowing, roared overhead to the other end of the strip.

'Aaaargh,'

Ian pulled up to sufficient height for his final approach, turned back and touched down – a perfect landing. The Cessna now headed straight at us and I had to hold the young visitors back until it came to a halt, and Ian switched off the engine.

The passengers now piled out of the aircraft and mingled with the onlookers. I wasn't sure who was most revved up, the recently-landed or the goggle-eyed onlookers.

The same argument now broke out over who would go up next, forcing Ian into his 'one-two-three' routine again. It was half-expected this time; I suspected there would have been a degree of disappointment if he had failed to adjudicate.

The aircraft took off again, but I now found myself under pressure from the three who had been up, who wanted to go back to the accommodation to tell the story of the flight to those who had stayed behind. I gave in, drove them to their quarters and hurried back to the airstrip in time for the next flight.

As there were only two passengers for the fourth and last flight, Ian beckoned to me to jump in. I had told him previously that I had held a pilot's licence in Broome, so he knew I was itching to fly again.

Up in the air, it was easy to understand the young people's excitement. At ground level, the station homestead was a welcoming place with familiar things all around: a dusty vehicle, a dog, a tree and its pool of cool shade. But from the air, it was a tiny man-made island surrounded by just about the most inhospitable landscape anywhere in the world. Roads and tracks radiating from the homestead disappeared into a red, Martian interior of shimmering plains where nothing grew. No longer the everyday sounds and objects that create a home; no barking dog or clucking chickens, no voices or rattle of machinery or perfumed air from the rose garden. It was impossible to look down on this blip of civilisation without admiring the pioneers who had established it, and the people who lived and worked there. Then, as we swung away to the Flinders Ranges, the land took on a new and terrifying aspect: sheer rock faces rising from giddy heights, deep unfathomable valleys and crevasses big enough to hide entire armies, tortured rock formations that had been sculptured by nature over millions of years into formidable landscapes that had yet to suffer a human footprint. The view through the Cessna's window held *me* transfixed – I could scarcely imagine its effect on the station's Asian visitors.

When we returned to the airstrip, Ian discharged his passengers, gave a

final wave and took off, executing one last turn before heading back to his own property.

For the young visitors, the flight had marked the end of their stay at Wirrealpa. I watched them assemble alongside their Genesis tour coach intending to wave them goodbye, but I realised after about thirty minutes that packing their luggage, stowing it in the coach and selecting their preferred seats was going to be a long process. I took some pictures, said goodbye and left them to it.

*

After lunch John and Anna left the station to return home while Warren and I prepared to work some sheep. He explained that while doing some earlier mustering of woollies he had seen a ram in a paddock with ewes, where it should not have been. He wanted it out. I was looking forward to this because although I have worked with cattle and am comfortable among them, I have had nothing to do with sheep.

We loaded one vehicle for me to drive while Warren grabbed a trail bike from the shed which he would use to cut out sheep from the general flock.

We headed out along a station road through flat, lightly-shrubbed country. Three emus ran across the road in front of the utility, their legs pumping, their small heads perfectly steady. They were the only living things I saw in the emptiness around us. After about five kilometres of weaving between occasional stands of low shrubs and crossing dry creek beds, we came to a cleared area where several paddocks met. There was a windmill, a water tank and pipes to troughs in each paddock.

Warren handed me a hand-held UHF radio then he went off on the trail bike for the woollies. There was a mob of sheep nearby but they all looked the same to me. However, Warren assured me that some had missed the last muster and were carrying much more wool than their mates. Watching him throw the trail bike around, surrounded by prancing sheep running in all directions, and cutting out the woollies was an education to me. He made it look easy but it obviously was not because those sheep seemed to know what was in store for them, and they wanted no part of it. Warren came back with four woollies which we guided through my gate into a yard near the windmill.

After several sorties we had eleven woollies and a couple of others with severe wounds on their flanks where they had been attacked by dingoes. They were to be taken back to the homestead, treated with 'magic' powder and kept under observation in a holding paddock.

Warren now climbed back on to the trail bike and brought in the wayward ram which was justifiably outraged by the interruption to his honeymoon.

Convincing the sheep to get into the trailer proved more difficult than the Asians, but they eventually gave in and were locked away.

It was late when we got back to the homestead but I gathered up my radio gear and, selecting a couple of trees near the garden gate down by the chook pen, I hoisted my aerial by the usual string-tied-to-a-stone method. I had just connected the battery when Warren wandered over.

'Mind if I listen in?' he said.

'Not a bit.'

It wasn't so long ago that Wirrealpa and most other stations in Australia were using this technology as their only contact with the world. It was commonly known as short wave or HF. In Australia it was often called the Flying Doctor radio or School of the Air. It was different to what we think of as radios because it required a long aerial. On pastoral stations there would have been a permanent tower with the aerial connecting the top of the tower to the homestead, where it was fed through the wall into the radio. It was a wonderful system over very long distances, and it was why I had renewed my amateur radio operator's licence and bought the Yeasu transceiver.

Warren was intrigued by my successful communication with Roger and Bill, not to mention a couple of hams. He was particularly interested in how small, neat and more technical the equipment was compared to his old radio which had been consigned to the shed as junk. Indeed, the only recognisable part of my radio was the aerial – they still haven't come up with a way of making that smaller.

While I was dismantling the equipment I asked Warren about the array of solar panels on his shed roof. It was an interesting story.

He said it had been an agonising decision, balancing the capital cost of the installation and its small daily running costs against the endless budget-draining diesel fuel bills to run the noisy generator. The decision was finally made to install a solar system that would meet their needs, with occasional use of the generators when they had visitors, or when the sky was overcast for lengthy periods.

It sounded all right but there was a rub: with power now available around the clock, the family began buying such luxuries as hi-fi equipment, a microwave oven, electric water heaters – even electric blankets. It wasn't long before they were using so much electricity they had to start up the generator almost as often as in the past. They certainly didn't regret this, it was just that the benefits of the solar system was now more related to their life style than their bill for diesel fuel.

After a quiet dinner I retired early to prepare for the next leg of my walk.

My maps showed that I would be heading fifty-three kilometres north-east to Wearing Gorge, due east six kilometres to Teatree then almost due north another thirty kilometres to Wertalooma Station. From there I would walk ten kilometres north to Balcanoona Ranger Station and another thirty kilometres to Arkaroola where there was a resort and caravan park. The distance was 130 kilometres, the longest leg so far. I needed a good night's sleep.

These Asian students had their eyes opened by a flight over Flinders Ranges.

CHAPTER 10

A lonely grave

3 – 5 May, days 29 – 31

(Chalmers Gorge turn-off – Lat: 30:56.667 Long: 139:09.283)

Succumbing to extravagance, I started the morning with an extra minute under a hot shower, my excuse being that it would be five or six days until my next one. I had been awake since 6am and when I emerged from the shower I was raring to go.

Breakfast was at 7am so I had plenty of time to complete my packing and dump my gear on the patio where I had dropped it a day-and-a-half ago. When I reflected on all I'd done, it seemed more like a week-and-a-half. I filled my water bottles and checked my food supply. Barbara, who had prepared a veritable breakfast smorgasbord, invited me to hoe in to as much as I could eat but, conscious of putting a dent in their reserves, I accepted only juice, toast and black coffee.

Barbara talked about her earlier life in medicine, in Adelaide, and I promised to send her a copy of the book 'Birthing a Private Hospital,' a true story by Nan Rogers, set in Adelaide. When she was in her eighties, Nan had been one of my mature age computer students who had struggled with the new technology. She had written six or seven books but had baulked when a publisher asked for a manuscript on a floppy disk.

After breakfast I said my goodbyes – as clumsily as ever. I was glad I'd stopped there to literally smell the roses but it was time to go. And so, fully booted and spurred, I set off along the road to the gate. It seemed to take twice as long as when I had come in. I passed the now-empty accommodation, the wool shed and the holding pen with the woollies before stopping to look back. The station looked deserted, even abandoned. How deceiving it was.

I resumed my journey but I felt as though I was walking in a dream. My

feet were moving but my mind was back at Wirrealpa where freshly-painted windmills were slowly turning and a disappointed ram was wishing he was elsewhere. I was so engrossed with the events over the past days that when I stopped at 10am for a break, I realised that I had no idea what the country I had traversed was like. There could have been waterfalls and sylvan glades and I would not have noticed them. I slipped off my pack and took a long look around.

It wasn't terribly rewarding. There was no sign of human habitation, and the land was almost perfectly flat. The 'hills' were barely recognisable as such – I had to stare at them and consult my map to be sure they were even there. My map showed Finke Creek to be nearby but there wasn't so much as a bush to indicate its existence.

Knowing that Wirrealpa had its own radio repeater and that they kept a continual listening watch, I took out my UHF hand-held radio and called the station on channel three.

Wirrealpa. This is Jeff Johnson. Do you copy?

Barbara answered almost immediately: *Hello, Jeff. How's it going? Where are you?*

I'm about twelve kilometres up the track, somewhere near South Mooney Bore.

I thanked her again for her hospitality and headed off with the Flinders Ranges still visible to my left. There were also some hills twenty or thirty kilometres ahead, while to my right was the start of the Chambers Hills. My map suggested a good overnight camping spot near the Chambers Hills turn-off, where two streams meet.

At midday I stopped at Wirra Creek in the shade of another towering red river gum and sent off my noon report by sat phone to Bill. The trees there were the first I had seen all day.

Another five kilometres brought me to a line of trees where Mt Chambers Creek crossed the road. There was a two-tyre track going off to the right, up the middle of the creek bed to Mt Chambers Mine, while the 'major' road (everything is relative) headed left, soon after the creek crossing. Yet another track went left to Kangaroo dam and bore. And right beside the road was Bob Mooney Well, which had probably been sunk by hand through hard rock to supply water for travellers reaching this major intersection. The country must have been crossed by hundreds of miners and graziers with wagons loaded with supplies and bales of wool. Now there was just Barbara and Warren – oh, and me.

As I approached my chosen campsite, the road did a big sweep to the left then came back again. I was puzzled at first because it had been more or less

dead straight, then I saw the junction of two substantial fences and a stockyard which was part 'colonial' and part modern. I had the impression that they were there before the road, and that the road builders had been forced to deviate around them.

There were better trees ahead but I decided to stay near the yards because the ground was fairly flat, there was plenty of firewood and there was a three-metre tree for my antenna.

I was feeling pretty good about all of this, when I pulled the radio from my pack and noticed that the towel in which it was wrapped was decidedly damp. I put off further investigation because it was almost time for my radio sched.

I felt surprisingly fresh, my feet were good, the pack wasn't killing me and I had covered thirty kilometres. All I lacked was a comfortable chair to flop into. I had the fire going in no time. The tent looked good and the radio antenna was up twenty minutes earlier than was strictly necessary.

Roger came through crystal clear but Bill was almost drowned out by static. We could just hear each other but we finished up relaying through Roger who worked us well.

I ate my tucker from the billy with my dessert spoon in between radio conversations. When I had finished eating, I twiddled the dial to see if there were other people on the air. As I spun the tuning dial through 7100KHz I picked up a strong snippet of conversation. I came back slowly, locking on to a group of amateurs having their regular scheduled chat. They called themselves 'The Travellers' Net' and their common interest was maintaining radio contact while on the road with their caravans and four-wheel-drives. After listening to them for half-an-hour, I decided that they were a group I could easily fit into. I took note of how they worked, resolving to make contact next time I came across them on air.

I was putting the radio away when I remembered that damp towel. I carefully dug out the three two-litre water bottles from the bottom of the pack and found that the constant bobbing movement had opened up a five-centimetre slit on the side of one of them. I transferred some of the remaining water to my day bottles, reasoning that as the split was near the top of the bottle there would be no further leakage, so long as it remained upright.

*

The country was changing again; there were creek crossings every half hour and the trees not only had denser foliage, there were more of them. I had Stirrup Iron Range on my left, and on my right were the Wearing Hills which seemed to be closing in around me.

It had been a warm start to the morning: twenty degrees at six o'clock.

In fact I had woken feeling uncomfortably warm but then I had counted my blessings – I knew it would get much colder in the centre. The radio sched with Roger had been exceptionally clear and we had been able to have a reasonable conversation for a change.

About 10.30am I arrived at a hard turn to the right where a sign informed me that I was about to pass through Wearing Gorge. It also warned of a narrow winding road with crests, creeks and dips for eight kilometres. I stopped to study it. There are not many signs in this part of the world so when the lone traveller comes across one, it demands attention. I decided to celebrate the occasion by taking a short break.

I had checked my maps the previous day and knew that the road I was following had been heading north-north-east to due north and that it now turned east.

Refreshed after my short break, I shrugged into my harness and followed the almost indiscernible Outouie Creek and its tributaries through the Wearing Hills for about eleven kilometres of bare undulating country. I say 'bare' because there was little in the way of grass or bushes, yet there were occasional clumps of trees to break the monotony of the landscape. I found it picturesque though I suspect you would have to be a bushie to properly appreciate it. And I wasn't alone – I was joined by three emus which appeared to have decided to show me the way. They walked ahead of me, always with a wary eye, constantly moving on as I approached. They were with me for an hour before moving off to my right, seemingly satisfied that I could be trusted to continue alone.

When I emerged from the gorge the road flattened out and, after a slight rise, I came to a junction of several fences and a ramshackle cattle yard with posts leaning at all angles. I stared at it, imagining the work that had gone into its construction and the mobs of cattle that had once been penned there, awaiting the trucks that would take them south. It was another glimpse into a past that was ruled by the rising and setting of the sun, and the speed with which a mob of cattle could be moved.

If the cattle yard induced nostalgia, the view ahead was one that brought me back to earth with a resounding bang. The land was now barren and flat; there was nothing between me and the horizon that bore even a passing resemblance to anything that could be described as a landmark. The one and only feature was the road which headed north in a dead straight line until it disappeared at some indeterminable point where the land met the sky. It was a vast, empty, lonely scene – I half expected to see vultures riding the thermals.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped out into the early afternoon sun and, settling into a steady pace, I determined to walk for another couple of hours.

Hopefully, there would be some decent-sized trees where I could camp… hopefully.

I plodded on. The only sounds were the flies buzzing around my face and the rhythmic crunching of boots on gravel. I think I was lost in a private reverie because I was suddenly conscious of the distant rumble of a truck approaching from behind. I turned to face it as the driver changed gears. The air brakes hissed and squealed, and the vehicle came to a halt amid swirling dust.

The driver wound down his window. 'This the way to Beverley Mine, mate?'

I have to admit that since starting this walk I had, when talking with strangers, become accustomed to being the centre of attention in at least the opening of a conversation. Yet here was this bloke, showing no more interest in me than if he had bumped into me in Little Collins Street, and asking without any preamble, if I could direct him to a mine. He was a truckie whose only interest was whether he had missed a turning – simple as that.

Walking up to the driver's door, I said, 'Not sure, I haven't passed it yet. I've got good maps, though. Would you like me to have a look?'

Does a duck quack? …

'Yeah, thanks mate.'

He remained in his air conditioned cab with the engine running while I took off my pack and found my maps. I had heard of Beverley Mine but I thought it was one of only two uranium mines in Australia, and that it was in the Northern Territory.

I climbed up on to the truck's running board so that we could look over the map I was on, and the next two covering about sixty kilometres. There was no Beverley Mine marked but he jabbed a finger at a T-junction he recognised about twenty kilometres ahead, where a road joined from the east. He said he had considered taking it from Yunta on the Adelaide-Broken Hill road. Visibly relieved, he wished me well, wound up his window, engaged gear and roared off leaving a cloud of dust that slowly disappeared into a pinpoint on the horizon. Heavy silence returned to my dead straight road.

Did that happen? I wondered.

I had walked about twenty-six kilometres when, incredibly, an indistinct line of trees materialised out of the afternoon shimmer. As I drew closer I saw to my relief that there was a rocky dry creek bed. It was identified by a sign: TEATREE CREEK.

I found a patch of sand for my tent and, after noodles and a successful radio sched, I called it a day.

*

Next morning I found that one of my bullet connectors was missing from a solar panel wire. I had noticed it hanging by a thread when I disconnected it yesterday afternoon, but I had hoped it would hold until I reached Balcanoona. Tom, at the National Park office at Wilpena, had told me to look up the Balcanoona ranger, a bloke by the name of Arthur. I decided to follow his advice – it would give me an excuse for asking to borrow a soldering iron.

I dug out a clip lead (a wire with a small alligator clip at each end) and jerry-rigged the solar panel connection to the battery pack to keep it charged. As I was walking around my empty campsite, I spotted the errant connector on the ground. It is a tiny thing, no bigger than a small fuse so I considered myself lucky to have seen it. I popped it into my belly bag; it would make repairs much easier.

The flies were now so bad I stopped about 9am and dug out my fly net. I had been waving and swatting since Teatree Creek, leaving a trail of squashed flies. Unfortunately, the flies were winning. It was more comfortable with the net over my face, but they still settled on my bare arms. Not that that worried me. It's a psychological thing: you can't stand flies on your face but you can tolerate them on your arms. Perhaps it's because you can get at them better when they are on your arms. They also offer a challenge when they are there – you can see how many you can flatten with a single slap? The long distance walker can become quite engrossed in such pastimes.

I must have been very engrossed because I realised when I stopped at Moro Creek at 11.30am, that I had covered no less than fourteen kilometres. Amazing how time passes when you are being mentally stimulated.

I unloaded my gear in the shade of yet another red river gum and had just taken the weight off my feet when I saw a grave. It comprised four timber posts and a light rail, all in quite good condition. This was testament to whoever had put it there, because the inscription suggested it was 133 years old. I was at the last resting place of Peter Egan who had died of thirst on 1 January 1874. I imagined the distraught traveller collapsing under a merciless sun, his throat parched, his skin blistered, knowing there was no chance of survival, yet hoping that somebody would appear with a water bag. I sat in the shade, listening to the whisper of the wind and studying the landscape which appeared benevolent now, but which could deal a cruel hand in the heat of summer.

I hoisted on my back pack, wincing at the soreness the straps were causing to my shoulders. As this had been building up for some time I decided to experiment with the straps to see if I could lighten the pressure. I remembered having been given instructions on this by an expert at the Go Camping store where I bought the pack. Toby had looked after me during my initial back pack research and had called in one of the other guys to adjust the pack to suit me.

I had even taken it back fully loaded after the purchase, for final adjustments. The fitting involved sliding out two aluminium strips and bending them to fit the curve of my spine. He showed me how to pull the two straps when walking uphill and another two when going downhill. I hadn't taken too much notice at the time because I reckoned I would be in mostly flat country. Today, however, I pulled the hip support belts as tight as I could stand and took up about three centimetres of shoulder strap to heighten the load. It felt as though I had a boa constrictor round my stomach until I eased it off a little then I could feel the weight lifting from my shoulders.

The low hills to my left were now showing small sections of sand, a foretaste perhaps of the desert ahead. One of the hills had so much sand it could almost be called a dune. I studied it carefully because I could see a trig point in the form of a pile of rocks at the southern end.

Late in the afternoon I spotted the buildings of Wertalooma Station and I decided that this was a good time to meet the folks. Warren had assured me of a warm welcome there.

There was nobody home. There was a nice green lawn (a tempting camping spot) with a flag pole in the middle. I called out but, unable to raise anybody, I skirted the homestead and wandered over to the men's quarters, looking for a water tank.

I found the tank, filled my water bottles, and was preparing to head off when I discovered a serious problem with my battery pack – my work jerry-rigging the clip lead had been too casual. I must have short-circuited two metal pieces, shorting out the batteries. They had become so hot, the plastic battery holder containing all ten batteries had melted on to the negative end springs. God, what a mess! And impossible to repair – I'm embarrassed to admit that it was the second 10 AA-case I had melted in exactly the same way. I berated myself for my carelessness. In the city there would have been no problem, but out here I knew that my ingenuity was about to be tested.

I reassembled it all as best I could, wrapped it with electrical tape and headed back to the main road. I had not been on it long when a south-bound truck pulled over. I chatted with the driver about my project and he told me about his round trip from Adelaide to Beverley Mine, carting wallboard for a building project. I finally discovered that Beverley Mine was another hundred kilometres up the road, way past the maps I had studied earlier.

I had gone another two kilometres when I came to a dry creek. After setting up my camp I took out my map and was delighted to find that I would be spending the night at Big John Creek.

Big John … he was still looking after me.

CHAPTER 11

Dining with convicts

6 – 18 May, days 32 – 44

(Balcanoona – Lat:30:31.954 Long: 139:18.186)

It was Sunday morning and I decided to have another crack at Macca on 'Australia All Over'. As it was cold, I elected to stay in the tent – I'll be honest and admit that I was also inside my sleeping bag. No standing outside a public phone box this morning, I told myself. I wasn't particularly looking forward to this self-imposed task because I was still finding the sat phone difficult to use as a telephone. Short emails were easy enough but I was far less comfortable with the phone. Also, I wasn't exactly brimming with confidence at the prospect of talking live on radio. However, screwing my courage to as high a level as it was likely to reach, I rang the 02 number and, within seconds, was connected to Lee Kelly.

'Good morning,' I mumbled. 'Jeff Johnson … walking through the centre from Augusta to Karumba.'

'Hello Jeff. Yes, I remember your walk. How's it going? Where are you now?'

'Going good. I'm about fifty kilometres south of Arkaroola.'

'Good for you. Hang on a sec, I'll see if I can get you on now.'

I relaxed a little, listening to the program through the sat phone's ear piece. Lee's voice had sounded all right but the music now playing was broken as though the connection was about to drop out.

Lee came back: 'You're on next. When Ian says "G'day, Australia All Over", that'll be for you. Okay?'

'Yep!' I hoped my 'Yep' sounded confident because I was as nervous as a nag in a glue factory. Conscious of how frustrated radio presenters can become when battling lousy mobile phone connections, I made sure I was holding the

sat phone with the antenna straight up to keep a good connection.

The music stopped and Macca came on air with the instruction. 'Pick up the phone … give us a call … eight-triple-three-ten-twenty-oh-two's-the-code-g'day-this-is-Macca-hello.' (That was: 02 8333 1020).

God, that was quick and it must have been my cue.

'Oh, er … hello Macca. This is Jeff Johnson. I'm backpackin' through the centre of Australia raising awareness of the DeafBlind Association.'

Excellent, I thought. At least you've given DBA a mention.

'G'day, Jeff. That's some walk. When did you start and where are you now?'

After I'd filled him in on that, he asked me what the weather was like and when I expected to finish the walk. 'Right. Well, that's good Jeff. Keep in touch. We'd like to follow your progress.'

That sounded like my cue to get off the line. 'Okay. Thanks, Macca.'

He then began talking to somebody else. I listened for about fifteen seconds (at three dollars a minute) and, when nobody came back to tell me my moment of glory was over, I hung up.

I packed my gear, mulling over my brief radio session and coming to the conclusion that it had been less than successful. I never seemed able to convey the importance of raising awareness and money for DBA. I hadn't even told people who to contact to make a donation. DBA had a web site but unfortunately, it still did not mention my walk. I decided I would try again in a couple of weeks and that next time I would rehearse and write down the points I wanted to make. Maybe if I started off by talking about DBA he wouldn't be so interested in the bloody weather.

*

I was now in very bleak country. There was no low scrub and no wildlife – I could see ten kilometres in every direction and the only 'feature' was the dry salt bed of Lake Frome, way off to my right. After an hour of this I came to the dingo fence which was originally built in 1880, extending 5200 kilometres from Dalby in south-east Queensland to Eyre Peninsula on the Great Australian Bight. It is difficult to imagine either the logistics or the hardships involved in such a project. It took five years to build but was only partially successful. Imagine building something like that, only to find that it didn't work as well as expected. However, parts of it are still maintained by two-person crews looking after three hundred kilometre sections. What a job!

A bloke called Dave pulled up in his ute; I had met him somewhere back along the track and, as I had now covered a respectable distance, he wanted to say hello again. He was casually dressed in the sort of gear city people wear

when venturing into the bush. He wasn't carrying much in the way of luggage and the utility, I noticed, was city clean. By that I mean there was a recent coating of dust over what would normally have been a spotless interior. Dave had been at the Arkaroola Resort and he told me to make sure I looked up Malcolm, the barman. I had the feeling that Dave had driven from Adelaide to Arkaroola to spend a few days propping up the resort's bar. I didn't inquire too closely – it was the sort of thing I had done myself many years ago.

Rising from the flatness five kilometres ahead, I could make out some low hills that were little more than a smudge on the horizon. When I checked my map I discovered they were the Balcanoona Ranges. They are in the Gammon Ranges National Park and part of the North Flinders Ranges. The hills now appearing are called The Bluff, and it was this feature to which my road seemed to be heading. The map showed a major road coming in from my left from Copley (Leigh Creek), a hundred kilometres due west. My road joined it at a T-junction but the map showed that after I turned right, it forked at the Balcanoona Ranger Station, a kilometre beyond the T-junction. There was a road going due north to Arkaroola but the main road headed north-east to join the Strzelecki Track at Mount Hopeless, 150 kilometres beyond.

This obviously represented a challenge which I hoped to resolve with some local knowledge at Arkaroola. I wanted to go to Arkaroola for stores (and sightseeing) but the road did not appear to continue from there. As a result, I would have to come back thirty-five kilometres to Balcanoona before heading north-east again. Importantly, Arkaroola is the last stop for food and stores until Innamincka, more than four hundred kilometres away.

When I reached the Arkaroola turnoff I went straight ahead towards the Ranger station. The road dipped into the dry rocky bed of Balcanoona Creek, the biggest I had crossed so far. I reckoned it was five metres deep. As I was clambering up the opposite bank it occurred to me that it must be a spectacular sight in full flood.

I now found tracks and side roads leading off in all directions. I was trying to make sense of these, at the same time taking a breather, when an Aboriginal bloke wearing a helmet and ranger's uniform arrived on a sort of trail bike. We exchanged nods and waves and he rode off leaving me to work out the road system.

The only one that was signed led to the ranger station – the restored Balcanoona sheep station. That made it easy for me.

There were several buildings, including the shearing shed, most of them built of rough-hewn stone and solid round poles for roof supports. The roofs were corrugated iron, but the floors were planked with what looked like hand-

cut boards worn smooth by thousands of busy feet over many decades. The shearing machinery was still there, silent and unused, but it would have needed but a short flight of the imagination to have seen it clicking and clacking a well-oiled rhythm, while a ten-man team prepared for the big muster. I almost heard the triangle being rung for breakfast.

The shearers' quarters were equipped with a central kitchen and there was a dining room, a big lounge/sitting room and ten twin bedrooms, all enclosed behind a wide verandah to waist height then fly-screened to the ceiling. Behind the shearers' quarters was the ablution block and beyond that the only indication of modern living – a Hills hoist. Take that away and I could have been back in the 1880s.

On the western edge of the quadrangle was the rangers' office. It was locked but I could see enough of the inside to make out a room with display stands and tourist information. Outside the office were a water tank and a Telstra phone box with a stool for caller comfort. There was also a table and bench seats, all under cover. Everything was clean and tidy – I was starting to like Balcanoona.

When I went back to the undercover table where I had dumped my pack, I was approached by a bloke in his forties. He was wearing a khaki shirt, faded blue trousers and working shoes, probably steel-capped. It looked a bit like a uniform but there were no insignia. He asked if I would like a cool drink. I said that I was right, but when he added a piece of cake to the offer – assuring me that it would be thrown out if I didn't take it – my resolve crumbled. He was back within a few minutes with a glass of juice and two pieces of fresh fruit cake. I thanked him, intending to ask who he was and what he was doing but he wandered away, a man with time on his hands.

I unpacked my damaged ten-battery pack and its mess of ten springs which were melted into the plastic pack holder, and laid everything out on the table. I pulled out the batteries which were still in good condition and gave them my undivided attention. Somehow, I had to work out a way of recreating ten 1.2 volt batteries into a pack that was wired together in series (positive to negative) to make a single 12 volt pack.

I was still deep in thought when my cool drink-and-cake man came back to watch me at work. This time he introduced himself as Robert. After I explained what I was trying to do, he said, 'Hey, there may be a soldering iron in the shed. I'll go and grab it.'

Before he left on this latest errand he explained that he and his colleague Scottie were prison officers, and that they were in charge of a low-risk, four-man work-party from Port Augusta doing two weeks' maintenance work. This

explained why everything was so neat and tidy.

Leaving my gear on the table (I had been assured the prisoners were 'trusted') I followed Robert to a shed in which were drawers filled with things that had once been deemed useful. Rummaging around, I found some large diameter solder used for fixing gutters. Robert came up with a soldering iron which looked big enough for use in the ship-building trade.

'Will this do?' he asked proudly.

'Just right," I said. It would have to be – it was probably the only soldering equipment within hundreds of kilometres.

Robert now had the bit between his teeth. 'Anything else while we're here?' he asked expansively.

I had just spied a small roll of yellow electrical tape and was wondering if the one I carried had enough left for the string-and-chewing gum repair I had in mind. I asked if I could come back and take some if I ran out.

'Take the lot.' he said.

Back at the table, Robert watched intently while I made two, five-battery rows, stacked so that they were alternately negative and positive up. Then I used the electrical tape to strap them into a rectangular pack. Using the hot iron (Robert had run an extension lead through the office window) I made up nine little jumper leads 12mm long to connect the batteries, soldering as I went. Robert was fascinated by how big clumsy tools could be effectively used in work that called for a fairly high degree of precision.

When I asked if he had anything in need of fixing, he yelped with pleasure, dashed into his quarters and returned with a UHF two-way radio charging stand that plugged into 240 volts.

'This is intermittent,' he said, adding 'in fact it only works occasionally.' He put it on the table, its input cable impossibly twisted.

'Should be able to do something with that,' I said. 'It will probably be a broken wire where it connects to the charger.'

I finished my job with the battery pack then soldered the bullet connector that had come adrift. I took it out into the sun and was relieved to see it charging again at 300ma.

Untangling the wires to Robert's two-way radio charger took about five minutes of painstaking work. I opened the charger, cut a few centimetres from the wires where they connected to a printed circuit board then stripped and rejoined them. Within fifteen minutes I had it all back together and the green LED was indicating everything was tickety-boo.

'Join us for dinner,' said Robert, adding unnecessarily, 'Thommo – he's one of the crims – is a good cook and its spaghetti Bolognese tonight. Oh, and

bring your gear. We'll fix you up with a room.'

'Be there shortly,' I said.

I was introduced a few minutes later to Scottie then Thommo, Dodgy, Matty and Tim. They had towels and they were about to pile into a car to go to Arkaroola Resort for a swim.

When they had gone Robert showed me how to use the washing machine, and found me a room with a bed and mattress.

Now that my domestic life was in order I set up my radio between two trees and had a good half-hour sched with Bill and Roger. I raised the problem of no Internet web site restricting promotion for my walk. Roger, who is a professional web site designer (among many other talents), agreed that we should have our own site and we decided to sleep on the idea and discuss it again later.

Dinner was a feast. Thommo had a huge bowl of spaghetti on the go and a saucepan of savoury meat. It was delicious. We all had seconds but only myself and Dodgy, a skinny streak with hollow legs, stepped up for thirds. My excuse was that I hadn't eaten properly for days.

There was a television in one of the lounges but most of us took our coffees outside and drank them around an open fire. Sitting on stumps we talked late into the night about such diverse topics as yachts and international politics.

In a way I was glad the boys were leaving the following day because I would certainly have been tempted to stay on and enjoy their company.

I had trouble getting to sleep that night. Maybe it was the spaghetti Bolognese.

*

I had breakfast with the crims, an unusual experience for a law-abiding bloke like myself. Not that I regarded them as crims; as far as I was concerned they were a good bunch of fellas who were paying the penalty. I had enjoyed their company, I had certainly not felt threatened and I'd had no hesitation at leaving my pack unguarded.

They and their South Australian Corrective Services officers left at 7.45am and, as I waved them goodbye, I couldn't help thinking that wherever they were going would compare badly with Balcanoona where they had enjoyed the freedom of the outback and a swim in a resort pool. The dust of Her Majesty's departing guests had barely settled before I too was on the road.

I had not been walking long when three cars pulled up. One bloke had seen me a few days earlier and had recently spoken to Warren Fargher of Wirrealpa, who had told him to keep an eye out for me. In another car was a

single guy who was collecting plant specimens. He must have categorised me as a rare specimen because he insisted on photographing me kitted up and wearing my fly net.

The road wound through low hills where occasional clumps of trees lent splashes of green to the otherwise red landscape. It was pleasantly warm with hardly any wind – perfect weather for long distance walking.

The Arkaroola air strip appeared on my left. I could see a hangar and a light aircraft parked nearby but there was no sign of life. I was within thirteen kilometres of Arkaroola when a busload of tourists stopped in a small cloud of dust. Doug, the driver, said he was taking them to the airstrip and promised to catch up with me at the resort.

I trudged on. It was turning into a big day – I had already covered twenty-seven kilometres when I came to a sign bearing the information that Arkaroola was five kilometres away. *Five kilometres!* Bugger all in a car but I was walking … and I'd already done twenty-seven kilometres … and I was stuffed. The road, as though taking perverse pleasure in my state of exhaustion, was now all up and down – even the surface was pebbly. Pity there aren't a few barbed wire fences to crawl through, I thought.

Arkaroola nestles among hills and has a modern central building comprising an office, a tavern, a small lounge area and a shop. It has to be said that although the range of goods on display would never rival Myer's, the shop did stock noodles, toothpaste, soap, bread, sausages and souvenirs – and the lone walker can hardly ask for more than that. The complex also boasted a service station with several bowsers, ten small cabins and a few trees. About a kilometre further on was the caravan park with powered sites, ablutions and the obligatory barbecue. The camping area, four kilometres away, was approached across a wide creek and was on about the only flat area of ground in the complex. It had no power, showers or laundry.

I had a busy night on the radio talking to Matt at Swan Hill (VK3FORD), Dale in Sydney (VK2GR), Trevor, Crystal Brook (VK5PTL) and Owen, Canberra (VK1AD). With that finished I enjoyed a baked dinner with lots of veggies as guest of the couple next door.

*

The following morning started with an invigorating four-kilometre walk to the shower in the dark. It was daylight when I emerged and I straight-lined it to the camping area down a steep hill and across the creek bed, gathering firewood along the way. My progress was closely monitored by a wallaby which seemed bemused by the behaviour of humans who had invaded his territory.

I met Doug Sprigg the establishment's owner-operator who has interests

in aviation (he takes tourists up in his Cessna 172), radio and astronomy (he has an observatory and large telescope for paying tourists). He also has an operational government seismograph on display in the shop.

Doug, a busy man, moves everywhere at a hundred kilometres an hour while conducting interesting, though hurried, conversations with this guests. His favourite saying is, 'Must catch up properly.' We got along very well.

I had been expecting a parcel from Bill but when nothing arrived I decided to book in for another night for $15. Nothing was cheap out there – an apple cost $2.

*

On my third day at Arkaroola I discussed the lack of publicity for DBA with Roger and Bill. I floated the idea of appointing an agent but they were not all that keen, pointing out that he or she would pocket fifty per cent of any money raised. I was a bit rocked myself but we agreed it was worth an enquiry. I even telephoned an old friend in Perth, Daniel O'Connor, who was up there in the corporate world, but he too was less than enthusiastic. 'Look,' he said, 'we live in a world where one-legged Japanese are likely to be seen hopping naked across the Nullarbor!' The implication was that just walking through the middle with a pack was bordering on the ho-hum and unlikely to trigger any outpouring of donations.

Doug invited me to join him for breakfast. Waving an arm across packets of cereal and loaves of bread, he said, 'Help yourself.' He started to tell a story but rushed away before it was finished saying, 'Must catch up properly.'

I went to the shop and found that my parcel had arrived. I now had a new camera card and a watch.

I met a great bunch of guys that night – seven Aussies doing the outback thing with a guide. I had dinner with them and gave the guide my used camera memory card in an envelope to post to Bill. It arrived safely after being posted in Melbourne.

I spent most of my final day in Arkaroola in the camping area. However I made one trip to the shop to talk to Anne and to pore over a 1:50,000 map plotting a short cut due east along Paralana Hot Springs Road to Blue Duck Mine, then a station track along Lady Buxton Creek to the main road heading north. It would save me having to backtrack those thirty-five kilometres to Balcanoona. Anne photocopied the map and I tucked it away in an easily accessible place in my pack for the next leg of my walk, due to start the following day.

My evening meal was a piece of frozen steak which had been 'marked down' because it had passed its use-by date. However, I subjected it to some fierce grilling on a piece of discarded tin over an open fire. I reckoned any wogs

which survived that, would be feeling too crook to cause me any discomfort.

I made three farewells to Doug, all of them while he was on the run. 'Must catch up properly,' were his parting words.

I waited until Anne started work and took a photograph of her wearing my pack. Anne is in her twenties, and has long blonde hair and the sort of skin that needs protection from our Australian sun. After we had been over the map again and plotted my shortcut, she asked me to email her when I reached the main road. I was touched by her concern but my response was somewhat macho. I was not in the least worried, I said … just cautious. This was half true – I was being cautious all right but if I had been more honest I would have admitted feeling just a little apprehensive. Following a road in that part of the world was one thing; taking shortcuts was something else entirely. If anything went wrong, help could be a long time coming.

I left Arkaraoola carrying a new supply of noodles, two Mars bars and an iced coffee. The Mars bars and iced coffee were snack tucker, I told myself.

My shortcut took me on to the Paralana Hot Springs Road, seven kilometres from Arkaroola. This road is used by some intrepid four-wheel-drivers but mainly by the resort's touring vehicle and its ten passengers.

It was rugged country and when I reached a dry creek I tried the sat phone again, hoping that Clive, at Astra Satellite Service, would get it working properly. Purely by chance, Janne rang while it was switched on and the antenna was up. I could scarcely believe it. We spoke for a minute or two then Clive came on, proving that there was no problem with in-coming calls. Reassured, I called Bill and asked him to try me again. It failed – he got the 'out of service' message.

My track climbed to Welcome Pound. It was hard going; the surface was strewn with sharp stones which would have made mincemeat of ordinary city tyres. It wound through low hills where tinder-dry scrub clung to red rock. It was relatively cool when I was there but I could imagine it turning into a furnace in the summer.

Picking my way between stones, I reached Claude Pass and climbed through a fence. There was supposed to be a station track off to the right but I could see no sign of it. Then, two kilometres further on I found myself in a dry creek bed which my GPS and maps showed to be Lady Buxton Creek. I had gone way past my turnoff.

Using my hand-held UHF radio I raised Arkaroola's four-wheel-drive tour vehicle which was on a ridge-top tour, and asked the driver, Derek, to tell Doug I was near Blue Duck Mine and would be camping there for the night. I then walked back to the fence I had crossed and found the station track I had been looking for. It was so cleverly disguised it was almost impossible to detect.

I followed the track, climbed through another fence and saw that I was heading roughly east, following the tree-lined Lady Buxton Creek.

I walked for another half hour before deciding to set up camp on a feeder creek's stony bank. The radio sched was successful and I was able to give Bill my exact position.

*

I awoke the following morning knowing that it would be a hard day, which was fine; I found myself looking forward to the challenge.

The road, or track, or whatever you like to call it, was undeserving of any name. I couldn't even see it unless I looked a long way ahead, then I could make out that vehicles had passed this way. The other clues were occasional truck tyre tracks where vehicles had cut grooves when the ground was wet.

I was still following Lady Buxton Creek when I spoke to Derek again on UHF channel 8. I even got Doug who was up in a Cessna with some tourists.

I arrived at the Balcanoona-Mount Hopeless road about 9.30am and took a photograph of the Lady Buxton Creek sign. I also came across a brass plate set into very old concrete and inscribed: 'Department of Lands South Australia benchmark 7114.'

When I reached the road I called Derek and asked him to pass on to Doug that I was back in civilisation. Doug intercepted the call in the Cessna and called me back to wish me luck.

I was now back on what seemed like a main thoroughfare, heading north-east across flat country with trucks and utilities either going to or coming from Beverley Mine, not far ahead.

At one stage I stepped off the road as a truck stopped with a hiss of air brakes.

'Have you got enough water?' asked the driver.

'Yeah, plenty. Thanks for stopping.'

'No worries. There's a dam ahead of you with yabbies in it. It's just off the road. There's a drag net on the other side – help yourself, mate.'

I thanked him again and he drove off towards the mine.

I found a windmill several kilometres along the road and I was walking towards the dam when the same truck drew alongside. He had left the road and followed me to tell me I was heading for the wrong dam. Pointing to a stand of trees, he said, 'It's over there.'

'Over there' was about two kilometres away. I decided to give it a miss; it was almost time to set up camp.

I arrived at an out-station home at north Mulga Station. I'd heard that 'Rod the Roo Shooter' lived there but there was no sign of him. It was a desolate

place, just a simple, run-down house surrounded by a fence with some clapped out pantechnicons to one side, and endless red dirt in all directions. It looked sort of occupied but if Rod the Roo Shooter was in residence I guessed that he was not overly house-proud. Nevertheless, I decided to stay and, setting up my camp outside the fence, I topped up my water bottles from a tank and threw my aerial over a couple of trees.

When the sun set I could see the lights of Beverley Mine about ten kilometres away. I could even hear their trucks.

*

The following morning I spent more time than usual on the radio. Roger told me how to listen in to the Wireless Institute of Australia (WIA) ham peak body broadcast at 9am each Sunday on 7.140. Bill had contacted them and they had added my latest position information to their broadcast. I consequently had a late start but I consoled myself with the knowledge that I had covered thirty-one kilometres the previous day.

The country was now dead flat except for a few low sandhills running east and west. I crossed Poontana Creek which was as dry as all the others I had seen but which looked as though it carried a lot of water when it rained.

It was slow going, perhaps the previous day's long walk had taken more out of me than I realised. When I came to where the vermin proof fence crossed the road I decided to call it a day. I had covered only nineteen kilometres.

*

Traffic was still heavy next morning. Not Pitt Street-heavy but at least one vehicle every hour or two. Some stopped, some drivers waved and thundered on but my favourite for the day was a shiny new four-wheel-drive towing a caravan big enough to hold a gymnasium and home theatre. Behind the wheel was an immaculate gent in his seventies and alongside him, a lady of great grandeur who, I guessed, had never before been so far away from her hairdresser. They pulled over and the driver wound down his electric window while his wife leaned forward and subjected me to the kind of inspection a British duchess would apply to a yokel with beri-beri – curious but ready to flee if he moved.

We had exchanged pleasantries when the lady in question noticed my DBA T-shirt. When I told her what I was doing, and that I was collecting for the DeafBlind, she first looked crestfallen then began a reluctant rummaging in the ashtray for a copper or two.

I stepped back mumbling something about not leaving themselves short, waved them a cheery goodbye and strode off towards the Gulf of Carpentaria. As they swept past, with the driver's window already on its way back up, I could

almost hear her saying, 'The *ingratitude* of these people.'

When I contacted Bill at midday he told me that our cousin Danny had formalised a visit to the Moomba gas complex for me, and that they had requested photographs for a flyer to let their employees know I was on my way. I was excited by this – Moomba Camp is huge.

By afternoon the sky was turning leaden and I was bending into a ten to fifteen-knot wind. The road had swung around and was heading nearly north-west.

I was battling a bit when I came to the road to Moolawatana Station (don't you love these Aussie names?). There were low hills ahead and in the late afternoon light the atmosphere became so heavy that if I had been anywhere else in the world I would have predicted rain. *Heavy* rain, actually.

Curiously, there was a sign near the intersection asking motorists to drive carefully to avoid children. I looked around – it might as well have warned against stampeding hippopotami. (It transpired that there was a reason for the sign though it had nothing to do with kiddies skipping in from the central desert; it was put there, I was told, to slow traffic to keep the dust down).

I was confronted at the station by a woman in her sixties who was busy in her garden. She straightened to greet me, obviously surprised by my unannounced appearance on her doorstep. I was surprised myself because I thought that Janne had been in touch with her.

She led me, a little reluctantly, towards the homestead, calling out to somebody inside. A second much younger woman emerged and there was a sort of handing over ceremony which involved the younger woman welcoming me on to the verandah, freeing the first one to return to her garden chores.

I learned later that the older woman was Audrey and that she and her husband Michael were the original station owners and operators. They were semi-retired and living in the first cottage I had approached. The younger woman was their daughter-in-law Karina who was married to Gerard. They had two young sons, Alistair and Randall.

The weather had meanwhile turned even more threatening; it was so oppressive I felt as though I could have cut the air with a knife. I was still pulling off my boots before going inside for a promised cup of tea when the heavens opened and it bucketed down.

People living in areas where rain is regarded more as an entitlement than an event can never appreciate the sheer joy generated in the parched outback by a sudden downpour. Up until this moment the people of Moolawatana had been looking at a country so parched even the lizards were thirsty. Now, almost within the instant, oversized rain drops were drumming on the iron roof as

though trying to smash it to pieces. Water was pouring off the roof in torrents, and the red earth was pooling in mud as the rain hit the ground like bullets. What little foliage there was, bent in the wind, whipping and lashing as though in a frenzy. It was pandemonium.

The boys raced outside to stand under the avalanche cascading from the roof, their arms and fingers outstretched, shouting with excitement, their clothes clinging to their wet bodies. They had rarely, if ever, seen anything like it. They stamped their feet in the mud, they threw back their heads and drank the water, they war-danced like Indians around a totem pole. Their parents watched them, beaming with joy – I'm sure they would have joined them if I hadn't been there.

Karina and Gerard came back inside the house to join the celebrations. Then Gerard pulled on some wet weather gear, cranked up a large trail bike and roared off to check how much water was flowing through the creeks.

I had seldom seen such spontaneous rejoicing. I couldn't help comparing it with the more sanguine reaction such a storm would have aroused in the city.

When the excitement died down and the boys, now cold and shivering, had been given hot baths and dry clothes, I was invited to dinner. It was spaghetti Bolognese again – not that I was complaining.

The phone never stopped ringing that evening. Neighbours were calling from three hundred kilometres away, checking on how much rain Moolawatana had received and passing on the readings from their own gauges.

I had a hot shower and headed off to bed with a warm feeling in my heart. They had invited me to sleep in a spare room, apologising that though there was a bed, there was no mattress. I told them there was no need to be embarrassed – I had become so accustomed to sleeping on hard ground I now tossed and turned all night on a mattress.

*

The rain continued all night. I enjoyed listening to its drumming on the roof and watching the lightning flash around the room. I imagined floodwaters moving slowly at first then rushing down the creeks carrying debris, and carving new courses through the land. I was also conscious of some difficult walking conditions in the days ahead. First, however, there was some mechanical work to do.

The station's cattle truck had some electrical problems and, as it was used to carry cattle to Port Augusta and Adelaide, there were fears that the cops might order it off the road. I reckoned the fears were well grounded – the brake lights didn't work, the indicators were not functioning and there were no

lights on the trailer. The truck, it has to be said, had seen better days.

I moved it out of the workshop into better light to a relatively dry area of ground and set to work.

I found some corroded wiring on one indicator but decided to fit another indicator from a wrecked motorbike. Karina drilled the holes and I wired up the replacement. It worked.

Over morning tea at the house I met Neil and Barbara, a couple in their late fifties who were working a three hundred kilometre dingo fence maintenance contract. They were living rough but I envied them. They had a four-wheel-drive tray-back with a canopy which carried all their repair and camping gear for a month at a time.

Back at the electrically-challenged truck I found a light socket that was buggered but I was able to swap it for one that was functioning. Then I isolated a single filament globe in the stop-tail light assembly that was blowing fuses. After lunch I spent an hour crawling into, over and around the cab, trying to find the fault that was stopping the brake lights working. I found I could get the lights to work using wires up to the chassis plug, but I was having no luck from the cabin plug to the brake pedal. There was no continuity. Taking a punt, I connected a temporary wire from the brake pedal to the cabin plug and found that it worked. I explained this to Gerard, pointing out that isolating the fault would involve almost dismantling the chassis. He said he was happy with my compromise.

Gerard set off on the bike late in the afternoon to check the rainfall on his two thousand square kilometre property. He also promised to check the road on which I would be travelling. Interestingly the Main Roads Department phoned to ask about the condition of the road; the consensus was that it should be closed.

*

There was much discussion over breakfast about which route I should take. Maps were produced and various alternatives were evaluated. The road past the property from Balcanoona to Mount Hopeless was now closed and it would be some time before even repair teams arrived there. The road joins the Strzelecki Track at Mount Hopeless but even 'the Strez' had been closed for several days. There is a road that follows the Moomba to Adelaide gas pipeline but it is private and used only by service vehicles. However, Gerard reckoned that it would be in better condition than the others because it carried less traffic and the oil company, Santos, would be doing everything possible to keep it open.

The decision was made. I would follow the pipeline road. My directions

were complex: follow the main road to the dog fence; follow the fence for about one kilometre; follow the track from the fence east-north-east for about ten kilometres to Woolatchi bore where it meets the gas pipeline road; follow the pipeline road for fifty-five kilometres to 'the Strez'.

This, I said to myself, will be fun. Thank God for my communications gear and equipment. In fact, I felt pretty confident, ready for anything. There would be plenty of water on the road and I knew there would be fresh water tanks at a roadside picnic spot at Monticollina bore.

After saying goodbye to the boys who were on School of the Air, I hefted my pack on to my shoulders and, with a wave to the rest of the family I set off for the main road.

The landscape was in stark contrast to yesterday, it was an amazing transformation. The road was flooded in parts and I could see sheets of coffee-coloured water standing in what had been dry semi-desert. I picked my way around great puddles, trying to keep my boots as dry as possible and avoiding the more glutinous patches of mud. Yesterday my footfall had been a steady crunching of leather on gravel; today it was an irregular sucking sound. Yesterday the sky had been blue, today dark clouds threatened.

I reached the vermin fence about 10am and found that the road was built up about a metre. I sloshed through more mud until I picked up the station track along the fence line which I followed for about a kilometre to a major gate.

The track now followed the other side of the fence but there was a second one heading off east-north-east, leaving the vermin fence to continue its merry way a little bit south of east.

After a brief rest I pulled on my pack, muttered, 'Here goes' under my breath, and struck off for Woolatachi Creek bore. The horizon had long been saucer-shaped, almost devoid of feature or vegetation and I had the feeling that I was the only one on earth, so empty was the landscape. It crossed my mind that a man could perish out here without anybody being any the wiser for a very long time. I pushed such thoughts to the back of my mind – if everything went ape shit I had my GPS and sat phone and access to ham radio.

The track I followed was either indistinct or there were other tracks leading off to who knows where – always a concern for the lone traveller in these parts. However, I remembered Gerard saying he had been out this way checking the rainfall so I should be able to find his bike tracks.

I found them all right but it wasn't as easy as it sounded because his tracks often disappeared where he had skirted flooded sections, and there were times when he had left the track altogether to investigate something that

had attracted his interest. Did I religiously follow his tracks? Did I straight-line? Or did I follow used tracks and hope that I would cross Gerard's? I decided to compromise and follow my instincts.

My boots were by now caked with mud and quite heavy. At one stage I had to cross a creek which, though not flowing, was six centimetres deep in mud. Another creek held only a trickle of water.

My progress was being observed by two kangaroos which were untroubled by either the mud or the confusion of tracks. They looked content; they had probably sensed that there would be an explosion of green feed in a few days.

When the windmill for Woolatchi Creek bore appeared dead ahead I awarded myself an elephant stamp for navigation. When I came to the gas pipeline road thirty minutes later, I told myself that I had done well.

I now headed north with the sky on my right heavily overcast. I could see the rain falling five kilometres away; it seemed to be moving roughly parallel with me, though I suspected that it would eventually cross my path.

Should I set up tent or keep going? I glanced again at the weather front then at the mud. Sleep in that? No … keep going. I plodded on.

I was now the only living thing in a very eerie world. The 'roos had gone, the sky seemed to be bearing down on me and the rain was moving ever closer. I didn't like it at all.

The wind picked up. Thunder crashed and rumbled and spasms of lightning briefly lit the gloom with incandescent brilliance.

Incredibly, the rain began pelting down only twenty metres away. I could see it hitting the ground, producing brief eruptions of liquid mud.

Big spots began bouncing off my hat. I had left it too late to erect the tent. Swearing to myself, I found the plastic top, dragged the groundsheet over my head and huddled against my pack.

The rain beat down but within a minute or so it eased back to a few big spots. I emerged from the groundsheet as cautious as a tortoise and looked around. The rain still seemed close enough to reach out and touch but it was definitely receding. Fifteen minutes later, I was on my way again.

The mud was now even worse than before and I had to stop every few steps and scrape it from my boots.

The sheer strangeness of the country around me was accentuated by the appearance every five kilometres of gas pipes protruding from the ground. There were bends in them and taps, and they were surrounded by security fencing. It was all quite freakish. I was in a primitive, totally unoccupied land yet there, rising from the red earth, was evidence of 21st Century technological

engineering, most of it below ground.

I camped at Mosquito Creek, choosing a spot about four metres away from the one-metre bank. I figured that as the land was flat there was no point moving further away. I somehow managed to get a fire going to brew coffee and heat up some noodles. Radio contact with Bill and Roger was good.

I had a bad night. Heavy raindrops were spattering against the tent and I could hear the creek running, it sounded like a raging river. I got up several times to check the level but when I made my last check at daybreak, I found it was only about sixty centimetres deep and flowing at a leisurely pace. I decided that a good imagination had its drawbacks.

*

Next morning it was painfully apparent that this was not a good day for walking; in fact it was out of the question. It was raining on and off, the ground was pure mud and there was hardly any sun to dry things out.

I spent the day dragging wood over for the fire and attending to lots of emails to Bill via the sat phone. We were mainly concerned at stepping up publicity for the walk and DeafBlind.

It remained overcast nearly all day but about 4pm conditions started to improve from the west and north-west. There was no traffic on the road – it was closed – and it occurred to me, not for the first time, that I might have been the only person on earth. Not that I was entirely alone. The flies, invigorated by the cool damp conditions, descended on me in plague proportions, trying to get into my eyes and up my nostrils and settling like blankets on my equipment.

The creek was back to a trickle by late afternoon and the ground was showing signs of drying. Maybe tomorrow …

*

When I got up at 6.30am it seemed that conditions had improved sufficiently for me to resume my journey. I made my morning sched with the radio standing on a raft of sticks to keep it out of the mud.

Walking was now easier. The ground had dried a little, the temperature was around eighteen degrees and by afternoon, there was blue sky aplenty.

I had meanwhile told Bill that I would listen continuously to UHF CH 3 while I was on the gas pipeline road.

About 11am a twin-engine plane flew south and parallel to the road, probably on track from Moomba to Adelaide. I gave them a wave.

The scenery was a little on the boring side. There was a ten-metre high hill, there was lots of mica in the road base, there were some microwave repeater towers (once you've seen one repeater tower, you've seen them all) and I came across a roadside electronic monitoring point alongside an empty carport. I

guessed that the carport was there to stop the monitoring bloke's car turning into a furnace in the summer.

I crossed Strzelecki Creek, and at one stage I was forced to walk barefoot through knee-deep water in Yerilla Creek. Mount Hopeless Creek, however, was a mere trickle.

Late in the afternoon I came to an airstrip alongside the road which boasted a small building, probably for waiting passengers. I considered camping there but as there were no trees for my aerial, I decided to go a little further.

Another two kilometres brought me to a reasonable looking camp site. There were no trees (and so no firewood) but there were a couple of three-metre high sandhills which should suffice for my aerial. They did – but only just. The balun (middle of the aerial) was only navel high when its optimum height is ten metres. Nevertheless, I had a successful sched.

I was aware that about two kilometres ahead of me was something that resembled a mini refinery; I could hear the distant rumble of large motors. My map indicated there was a T-junction but there was no mention of any infrastructure. I was intrigued.

CHAPTER 12

The Strzelecki Track

19 – 23 May, days 45 – 49

Montecollina bore – Lat: 29:24.022 Long: 139:59.664)

My world continued flat. I was starting to feel sympathy for the so-called Flat Earth Society! There was a low line of sandhills in the distance but otherwise I might as well have camped in a saucer. There had been heavy dew overnight which had soaked my tent fly and formed diamond droplets on the sparse undergrowth. During my morning sched I asked Bill to include a pair of tracksuit pants in my parcel to Moomba.

The pumping station I had heard the previous evening was again clearly audible; in fact I could now hear their phone ringing and I guessed they had a loud external bell. But there was a strangeness about it, being surrounded by such overpowering emptiness in which the only sound was the shrill ring of a telephone.

As I drew closer and saw the size of the station I would have estimated, if I had been given a guess, that a hundred men would be working there. I would have been wrong – it was completely automated. There it was, generating electricity from the gas main, fully fenced with razor wire, tall stacks, a helicopter pad, air strip and wind sock, and nobody was there. It was as though the country had been subjected to attack by germ warfare and the population had been wiped out, leaving the infrastructure working and undamaged.

I walked past this scene of empty busyness as though in a trance. In the process I learnt that the establishment was known as Pumping Station Number 2 and that it boosted the gas pressure to Adelaide.

Although the rain had fallen only a short time ago, the country was already sprouting a soft fringe of green. It was also managing to sprout even more flies.

I came to a sign saying 'Lakes Crossing' which made me nervous. My imagination was at work again – I envisaged multiple small lakes and impassable roads forcing me to return to Moolawatana. My only alternative was to leave the relative safety of the road and head across country to the Mount Hopeless road, and hope it wasn't flooded as well. I knew I could skirt the flooding by leaving the road and going bush but the idea did not appeal. I finally decided that my best option was to keep pushing ahead.

The barren country now changed spectacularly. The green undergrowth was two metres tall, weeds sprouted, and clumps of bushes looking refreshed from the rains were dotted everywhere.

My road traversed this strange empty land in an endless sort of way. If there had been bends or an occasional hill it would have been less daunting but this was a ruler-straight road that disappeared to a point on the horizon.

I arrived at the Strzelecki Track about 1pm. It was not very inviting. Its wide gravel surface was badly chopped up and there were wheel ruts filled with water.

Another five hundred metres and I turned off to the left towards Montecollina bore where there were picnic tables about a kilometre off the road. The track was boggy and slippery but well marked with pine posts.

It was a surprisingly welcoming place. Several picnic tables had their own shelters and there was a composting toilet and information boards listing the wildlife in the area. A small lake was kept filled with free-flowing water from a deep bore, and was home to ducks, rabbits, kangaroos, lizards, white cockatoos and galahs. After what I'd been through it was a veritable Garden of Eden. There were, however, no trees of any height and I had to sling my aerial between a sandhill and a shelter roof.

Feeling more relaxed I pitched my tent and did some laundry. I also topped up with drinking water from a tank on which was displayed a sign warning that the water may be contaminated. But the top of the tank was closed, and I guessed that the sign was there to forestall any insurance claim from some smart arse who reckoned he'd been poisoned.

I was still quite alone, not a movement anywhere. My orange tent seemed colour-coordinated with the red soil but it was an odd sight in that vast emptiness. It looked like a tortoise shell; it was the same shape and it was certainly the only home I had.

*

Today being Sunday, I called Macca again, this time better prepared. They called me back on the sat phone and I was able to get my message across about DeafBlind as well as information concerning my website and ham radio

frequency. Macca appeared interested – I think he picked up on the Strzelecki which is a well-known outback track.

I tuned in to the WIA news which gave me a good mention then I joined in the talk-back with the news operator in Queensland. It was all good publicity for DeafBlind.

I was still packing up about 9.30am when I heard a grader working on the road ahead. Twenty minutes later it emerged quite suddenly from behind a low sandhill and drove into my picnic area.

The sight of a grader normally arouses little interest in me but the emergence of this one into my previously lonely world could hardly have been more dramatic. It was like some sort of film sequence which has been staged to shock.

Michael stepped down from the machine. He was a fit looking bloke in his forties, tidily dressed in jeans, a blue T-shirt and an unzipped bomber jacket.

'You right, mate?' he asked.

'Yeah, sure. Just stopped last night for a camp and a water top-up.'

'Anything you need?'

'No, going good. You working on the road?' A dumb question – he wasn't preparing a site for a drive-in theatre, was he?

'Yep, it's supposed to be closed but a few have been through and chopped it up pretty bad. Some of the edges are washed away as well. There's a big crowd stuck at Innamincka waiting for it to dry out.'

Michael said he had come out to see if I needed anything. His boss had heard me on Macca's program and, when I'd mentioned Monticollina bore, he told him to come out and check that I was all right. We talked about the walk for a while before he dug into his lunch box and forced an apple on me. Then he hopped back on to the grader and drove off to continue with his road maintenance.

An hour later, I was picking my way along the road when I heard the unmistakable *whoop-whoop-whoop* of an approaching helicopter. It was coming from the north, straight at me. My immediate thought was: *what next? A hovercraft, perhaps?*

I fished out my camera, flicked it to video mode and began filming the chopper as it finished a 180-degree turn and landed a hundred metres away.

The observer climbed from the passenger's seat and walked across with outstretched hand. 'Richard Bennett, Santos' he said. 'Just checking the road for damage. Do you have enough water?'

I glanced around the flooded landscape. 'Plenty, thanks.'

After an exchange of pleasantries Richard climbed back into his helicopter

and was whisked away.

Outback silence again settled on my vast world of red plains, flies and the single road that seemed to be leading nowhere.

There were no more cars or helicopters that day which was probably as well because I covered only twenty kilometres before setting up camp at a place where my map showed nothing but blank space. No fence, no creek, no windmill, no hill worthy of the name. Nothing.

*

I was lying in my tent, dozing and sleeping and, in my half-awake moments, listening to my transistor radio. It was 2.40am when I heard my brother Bill talking to Trevor Chappell who hosts one of the ABC's 'Overnight' segments. They were discussing my walk and the importance of raising public awareness of the DeafBlind Association. I smiled happily – our publicity campaign was finally starting to bite.

I was back on the road at 9am and had not been walking long when a south-bound four-wheel-drive pulled up with four blokes in their late thirties onboard. They had been stranded on the Strez for four days, waiting for it to reopen. They had a sophisticated-looking camera which they put to good use, filming me doing everything except answering a call of nature. They seemed particularly intrigued by my age.

A bit further and a north-bound ute pulled over. Actually, it was more like a sleigh towed by reindeers because the driver, though clean-shaven and not dressed in red, was making a special trip to bring me the most wonderful presents. They were not gift wrapped – they came in a plastic bag – but they included two blueberry muffins, a Mars Bar, a Snickers Bar, a packet of Monte Carlo biscuits and a two-litre bottle of chilled water, straight from the esky. I can still make my mouth water just thinking about that little lot. The bearer of the bounty was Sandy, the bloke who had sent Michael out, after hearing me on Macca.

After a sumptuous lunch I again met up with Michael. He wanted to stop and talk but he had to keep going. We continued our conversation on UHF channel 40 until I was out of range.

The country changed again and by late afternoon I was deep in sandhills running north-north-east to south-south-west. Most were about eight metres high though there was one which rose to eighteen metres. Amazingly, they are exactly where my very old map showed them to be.

*

I began my day early and by midday I had covered seventeen kilometres. It was a good start; I thought I might even break my record of thirty-three

kilometres.

I counted ten cars but easily the most memorable was a four-wheel-drive which came up from the south. The driver pulled over and we had the usual conversation: 'What the hell are you doing? Do you need water?' The difference was that this was a woman, travelling alone in a neatly-packed vehicle but with no caravan in tow. Her name was Libby and she had the most wonderful smile.

Libby explained that she was travelling from Perth to Brisbane to collect her daughter at the airport.

I did a double-take: Perth to Brisbane *alone and through the middle?* This was my type of woman.

She went on to say that she had sold the house and was 'on the wander'.

Perhaps I'd been too long in the outback but it seemed to me that there was destiny in this meeting. She was of mature age, she was available … and that smile! I reckoned she didn't smile to other people like that.

Now I have to confess to being a bit on the slow side in these situations – grass doesn't just grow under my feet, it withers and dies there. So I rather surprised myself when I found myself saying that it would be nice to catch up for a coffee sometime, and could I have her phone number?

Looking back, I can't remember ever doing that before yet there I was, in the middle of nowhere, asking a woman for her phone number within five minutes of meeting her.

Libby, not in the least put out, produced a piece of paper and wrote: Libby 04 …….. She in turn wrote down my web page details to ensure she could keep in touch.

That done she engaged gear and began to drive off. I looked down at her piece of paper, misread it and called out, 'Bye Abby.'

'Oh, well done,' I said to her disappearing car.

I crossed the huge but dry Strzelecki Creek with Innamincka still 195 kilometres ahead. However, I was no longer daunted by distance; I was starting to judge it by the time it took to cover rather than by kilometres.

I made camp that night just off the road in a stand of poplar-like trees. They were not very tall and they looked anything but healthy but at least they gave me height for my aerial. I had covered twenty-eight kilometres, not bad but well short of my record.

*

At 10am next day I was overtaken by a tag-along convoy of nine four-wheel-drive vehicles. When the leader stopped, the rest pulled in behind and I was soon surrounded by camera-wielding tourists, most of whom reckoned they'd never seen anything like me before.

I told them my story, always plugging DBA, while they plied me with cups of tea, bunches of chilled grapes, chocolate, cup cakes, oranges, bananas, apples and nuts. It turned into a sort of competition to see who could give the most. I diligently stuffed food into my mouth, at the same time explaining the purpose of my walk and describing the wonderful work done by DBA.

It was a great stopover which ended with promises of donations via the web page and the threat of severe indigestion if I didn't get moving again.

I came to a road on my left which led to Century Rig 3, whatever that was. The sign requested all vehicles to stop at the crest of the first sandhill and call in on UHF.

A fence and road grid enabled me to pinpoint my position. Merty Merty Station was somewhere off to the north-east but it was another twelve kilometres to the turnoff then another twelve kilometres due east to the homestead. If I turned here and straight-lined it to the homestead I would save a lot of distance.

I called Bill on the sat phone and told him I was leaving the road and heading off across the sandhills. I also phoned the station from the top of the first sandhill I crested (I had their number from Moolawatana), and said I would contact them later on UHF.

My progress was now very slow. I was travelling across the sandhills, climbing one side and down into the valley of the next. And these were no longer small hills, they averaged sixteen metres which is a tough climb when you have a load on your back.

The valleys were not easy either. Most had been turned into shallow lakes or mud baths so that I was forced to study each one and decide whether to straight-line to the other side or skirt around it. Occasionally I came to a dead end and was forced to backtrack. It was frustrating, it was exhausting – and it was no shortcut.

Towards the end of the day I crested a sandhill and saw the station buildings about five kilometres away. I was tempted to push on but I knew I was too tired. I would have to camp where I was. I called them on UHF, told them my plans and suggested that once it was dark, they should be able to see my campfire.

I now felt better. I had made it safely across some terrible country, a ham (Mike, Port Pirie VK5MCB) had promised a donation and a university professor had come on air with a $2000 donation and a promise to match the total amount. My fire was blazing cheerfully, my radio was working well – and there were flowers in the desert – brilliant red and yellow wildflowers peeping boldly through the undergrowth.

CHAPTER 13

An unexpected gift from Talc Alf

24 – 26 May, days 50 – 52

(No map feature – Lat: 28:35.312 Long: 140:14.762)

I decided to straight-line it to Merty Merty homestead which wasn't all that easy because I could see the station only from the tops of the highest sandhills. However, I maintained a mainly north-east course, but favouring north when there was no other choice. As a result I came out west of the homestead and had to adjust after consulting my GPS and maps.

While walking through the back of the three thousand square kilometre station, I noticed a number of caravans about two kilometres away and assumed they were the out-camp. It was actually a junkyard.

I was again greeted by an elderly lady, again a little apprehensively. Her name was Pam and she had been on the station for many years. The current boss was her son Marty and his wife Alison. So we had Marty of Merty Merty. The family was completed by Alison and Marty's two young boys.

Marty's greeting was not over-whelming, but I was invited to join them for a cup of tea and toasted cheese and tomato. Marty also took me on a tour of the machinery shed with its desalination plant which could produce 250 litres of water an hour. It used heaps of electricity generated by diesel motors.

I accepted an offer to do some laundry but opted to use a large bucket rather than a washing machine because I did not have enough to justify using their power and water. I intended leaving with wet clothes but they insisted I use the dryer. I felt guilty about this – more electricity that had to be generated.

I also accepted their offer to stay for lunch but I had already decided to

move on after the meal. The family's hospitality was all that could be expected but for some reason I could not explain, I was not a hundred per cent comfortable there. I left at 3.30pm, my water bottle replenished and my stomach satisfyingly filled with sausages and onion gravy.

*

Cheered by a lovely sunrise I hit the road early, covering the six kilometres to the Strez in next to no time. It was bleak country with sandhills running north-south. But it was obviously well-traversed country because there were signs everywhere. One lonely intersection sprouted more signs than the Champs Élysées.

Klaus bore was another 'must stop'. I have no idea who Klaus was (or is) but Santos has made sure that his name will be remembered. The plastic-lined dam is used to supply water for drilling teams – and the local birdlife is making the most of it as well.

I spoke to Gary on UHF; he was driving for Jeff Fulwood Transport, Quorn, and he was returning from Moomba that afternoon. He wanted to know if I needed anything. I told him jokingly that a block of ice would be nice. I thought no more of it until he pulled over in his semi-trailer a few hours later and handed me three ice blocks wrapped in newspaper.

Traffic-wise, it was a busy day. There were heavy rigs, utilities, grey nomads towing caravans, low-loaders – about one in five stopped for a chat.

My camp for the night was on a sandhill, about ten metres off the road.

*

I awoke to a cold morning and a ten-knot wind tugging at my tent. I stoked my fire and breakfasted on a fruit bar while watching flames roaring from the side of the fire, turning it into a small furnace of glowing coals.

Back on the road again Nick stopped in a big flat top truck with the news that I had been invited to give an evening talk on my walk in a Moomba theatrette. This was encouraging; I envisaged some healthy donations.

Today marked my personal introduction (in a manner of speaking) to Talc Alf. Talc Alf, I should explain, is something of a celebrity in those parts. He is an old codger who lives in a simple bush house at the start of the Stez at the western (Copley) end, making a living selling his carvings to tourists. He also listens to Macca because he had heard one of my interviews and wanted to acknowledge my effort.

I knew nothing of this until a family pulled over in a four-wheel-drive towing a caravan. They had called in on Talc Alf while heading to Port Augusta and they had told him they would be returning to the Strzelecki Track when it was opened. Talc Alf had given them one of his carvings, asking that they pass

it on to me when they eventually caught up with me on the track. They had put the carving in the back of the car and had thought no more of it until they saw me this morning.

When they pulled over I was expecting the usual generous enquiry, 'Did I need anything?' and was somewhat taken aback when the driver poked his head through the window and said, 'I've got something for you.' Leaning back into the car, he asked the two kids to get 'it', leaving me wondering what the devil he was talking about.

The kids couldn't find 'it' and it wasn't until Mum got out and took charge that Talc Alf's carving came to light, and was duly handed over.

I was deeply touched, on two counts. I appreciated his gift and his recognition of DeafBlind, and I admired his faith in the Australian outback's 'delivery system'. How many places are there in the world where a carving can be given to an unknown motorist for delivery to an equally unknown recipient, who is travelling in the same direction but who is three hundred kilometres away? Not many, I suggest.

My problem was what to do with it. I weighed it in my hand, decided that it was equivalent to three Muesli Bars, but vowed to carry it with pride to the end of my journey. I also promised myself to catch up with Talc Alf one day and swap some yarns.

It was a day of surprises. I found a camel track but no sign of a camel; I came across upside-down trees that had been blown over and rolled like tumbleweed until they came to rest with their roots pointing into the air – and I discovered a white roadside memorial inscribed: *In memory of John Beck 10-4-46 to 14-4-96 from Moomba workmates together forever*.

Four trucks carrying transportable houses swept past. I watched them from the road for an hour and listened on UHF as they disconnected trailers and towed each other through a boggy patch of road.

I covered twenty-three kilometres that day; I was making good time. I was only nine kilometres from Moomba but I was not due there for two days. Since leaving Port Augusta I had walked 734 kilometres.

CHAPTER 14

Luxury Moomba style

27 May – 8 June, days 53 – 65

Moomba – Lat: 28:06.688 long: 140:12.741)

I had been so concerned about arriving in Moomba a day earlier than expected that I had asked Bill to check with them in case there was a problem. I need not have worried – the message from Moomba (through Bill) was to keep walking.

There were signed roads to Innamincka leading off to my right and even more signs for Moomba, which was dead ahead. These warned that Moomba was no tourist destination and that people not on official business should keep out. I was glad I was expected.

Walking into Moomba from any direction is an unforgettable experience. It rises from the desert like a small city, its towers and stacks seemingly reaching for the sky. What has been a vista of red soil with occasional splashes of green, suddenly gives way to modern technology on a grand scale. Trucks and cars scoot busily through the complex, light aircraft and helicopters are everywhere. It was like a space station, humming with purposeful industry and totally self-supporting. Walking towards it, I felt like a visitor from another world, which I suppose I was.

I was met at the security gate by Ric who invited me inside his guardhouse. He was polite and welcoming but I knew I would be going nowhere until he gave the nod. He made coffee, telling me that Brian Hall had been contacted and that he would be along soon to pick me up.

Brian brought good news. I had been given a room – V-16 (I guessed the V stood for 'Visitor'). He said he would drive me there so that I would have time to make myself comfortable.

Comfortable! It had a queen-size bed, air conditioning, a hot shower,

a desk and my own phone. To a bloke who had just wandered in from such places as Mosquito Creek and Montecollina bore, this was Buckingham Bloody Palace.

I luxuriated. I unpacked, I showered, I combed my hair and I tested the bed. DON'T get used to it, Jeff.

Reid Toogood (was that name significant?) came to collect me and escort me to lunch. It was a huge dining room capable of accommodating up to six hundred hungry workers over several sittings. The smorgasbord on offer would have done a five star hotel proud; it certainly received my undivided attention.

I looked around in a sort of daze. There were six computers for internet access, table tennis, bowls, pool, a movie theatre and a bar in which an A4 flyer announced: 'Jeff is coming'.

Reid, who turned out to be the CEO, took me back to his office where we spent an hour talking about yachting and other mutual interests. We got along well. He introduced me to communications engineers who spent the afternoon with me repairing my gear. I was given a guided tour of their communications area and an insight into the telemetry of the five hundred-plus production wells and site refinery.

Thus fed and intellectually rejuvenated, I set up my own antenna and spoke to Roger and Bill, telling them of my new-found hideaway.

After a splendid dinner I was introduced to the flying doctor nurses and a gymnasium personal trainer who promised to check my state of health.

There were after-dinner drinks (Solo for me, wine for Reid) then he left, explaining that the others would be reluctant to come up and chat while he, the boss, was there. Sure enough, several guys wandered over to say that they either knew I was coming or had passed me on the road.

*

After an early breakfast I was checked out by nurses Charles Underwood and Donna Lamb who announced that my blood pressure was 123/86, my blood/sugar 7.4 and my cholesterol 3.8, none of which suggested my early demise.

I returned to my room to prepare some notes and select photographs for that night's talk in the theatrette. I can't say I was looking forward to it because I'm not a good speaker and I wasn't even sure I could fill in my allocated twenty minutes.

However, it went all right. When I walked on stage in full kit there was genuine interested in what I was doing and, once I got a couple of good questions fired at me, I felt more comfortable. I took the pack apart, explaining how the solar panel worked and demonstrating my communications system.

My twenty-minute session turned into two hours and at the end of it, I collected donations totalling a little more than $100.

When I left the theatrette I ran into a group of young people who wanted to know what I was doing, and when I walked into the bar I was again surrounded by people who had missed my talk and wanted me to repeat it. One of the guys reckoned my floppy hat was looking worse for wear and he replaced it with a new one from ESS Support Services. He asked me to sign my old one, promising to auction it and donate the proceeds to DeafBlind.

*

It was raining next morning. The sky was leaden and it was clearly no day for walking. I sighed heavily, though half-heartedly – if I was going to be delayed by rain I would have been hard-pressed to pick a better place. I spent the day enjoying the luxuries of Moomba.

Next morning the weather had cleared, and I packed, had breakfast and said goodbye to a few blokes in the dining room. I also called in on Reid Toogood and had another long chat and a coffee before I topped up with chocolates from the charity sale box, and resumed my journey.

It was 114 kilometres to Innamincka and it would take me five days.

I was offered a lift to Moomba's front gate (it was a long way and they figured that wouldn't be cheating) but I declined. Better to show the flag properly, I thought.

I struck out under a fairly clear sky and reached the gate within an hour, just in time for another cup of coffee with Ric.

It was another two kilometres to the Innamincka turnoff. My pack seemed considerably heavier than when I had arrived, then I realised that I was now carrying tracksuit pants and a few extra things I had picked up at Moomba. Either that or my two-day sojourn had made me soft.

I turned left to Innamincka, following the road as it curved across the sandhills. After seven kilometres I could still see the refinery stacks. When I checked my map I found that as the crow flies, they were only 2.5 kilometres away. Then the sandhills began to disappear and the road once again stretched straight ahead, seemingly to infinity. A sign told me that this was route I 95.

I settled into a sluggish pace. There would be no record this day, I decided.

A south-bound truck pulled over and the driver and passenger hopped out. The passenger was a middle-aged cyclist who had accepted a lift. Perhaps his resolve had weakened, or maybe his bike had broken down – I didn't like to ask.

I had covered only sixteen kilometres when I reached two bushes which

were just the right height for my aerial. Perfect, I thought. I pitched my tent, got a fire going, brewed some of my favourite coffee and settled in with my novel which I read with the light from my windup torch. The coffee and novel had been mailed to me by Bill.

There was another heavy overnight dew and when I crawled from my tent next morning I found water beading on the outer cover and running to the ground in tiny rivulets. I hung it over one of my bushes to dry a little before packing it away.

I discovered I had made a serious mistake with my solar panel wiring repairs back at Moomba. The people there had provided me with plugs (Belling Lee polarized round and flat pin) but I had reversed the positive-negative polarity wiring on the solar panel. Terrific – the solar panel had been discharging the batteries instead of charging them. I was able to use the radio on its internal battery but I was still annoyed with myself for making a mistake with equipment that was important for my safety. There was no excuse for it. It took me half-an-hour to jerry rig a repair.

The country was now transformed by the recent rains. Water was standing everywhere and, as though by magic, entire colonies of waterfowl had moved in. There must have been hundreds of them.

The road, sometimes flooded, headed east, then south and finally north-west to run parallel with the sandhills, following their valleys rather than climbing over the summits. Then I was back into the flat country.

I camped at a small stand of trees next to some cattle yards. There were no cattle and certainly no people, however, there was a dam and I was able to break off enough dead branches from some stunted trees to start a campfire.

I was feeling pleased with myself. There was a full moon which hung like a white lamp in a crystal clear sky – and I had put thirty-one kilometres behind me.

I was standing by the fire with a cup of coffee when a utility slowed down and drove right up to me. It was Reid Toogood.

He hadn't wanted to come out last night but he had calculated where I would be camping tonight and he had brought two thick sandwiches, two oranges and 2.4 litres of tomato juice. We chatted for half-an-hour then he said goodbye and turned back to Moomba. What a man.

*

It was 1am and I was tuned in to my radio, listening to the ABC's Tony Delroy on the subject: working past retirement. It got me thinking so much I couldn't get back to sleep. I eventually rang him and said that I was sixty-six and not working but that I was walking for charity. I won several minutes on-air

time in which I managed to mention DeafBlind and my website www.jeffswalk.com. Then I went to sleep.

It turned bitterly cold so that long before first light, I was pulling on a pair of socks and my recently-acquired tracksuit pants. My thermometer later confirmed that the temperature had dropped to five degrees.

I had an excellent morning radio sched, speaking to Horst (VK2HL) Dee Why in Sydney and others.

A water truck pulled over to load water from a dam for a drilling site. It was quite a performance. He had to unload his motor-driven pump and what seemed miles of hoses and connections. The driver explained that the various companies had water sources spread all over the countryside and the drillers or miners specified which were to be used at certain stages of their operations. He said the result was that drivers from the same company often passed each other carting water in opposite directions. The message was that in these parts, there is water and there is water.

I passed another simple roadside memorial to 'Dody' Mathew D'Arcy Dodsworth.

Road signs for Innamincka began to appear. For me, it was several days away but I knew they would be of interest to motorists. One sign promised coin-operated washers and dryers, hot showers, a public telephone, self-serve cappuccinos and same-day personalised laundry, all to be found 'near the big tower.'

I crossed a boundary into one of Sid Kidman's stations. 'SK', as he was called, died many years ago but many of his properties remain in the family. The story of how he left home aged thirteen with a few shillings in his pocket is well-described in 'The Cattle King'.

When ranges of sandhills appeared ahead I decided to set up camp at a spot just south of Della Satellite. I had no idea what Della Satellite was but it was on my map and I could hear it. I was in no doubt that my curiosity would be satisfied in the morning.

*

Another cold night and another drying out in the morning. Della Satellite turned out to be a central gathering point for field production wells. I was again struck by the stark contrast of technology plonked in the middle of a land as old as time itself.

A truckie stopped; it was Digby who is a friend of Pete who also drives trucks in these parts. Pete has stopped several times. Pete said that Digby had some fruit for me and that he would be passing in a couple of hours. Amazing … I've got a delivery system working here!

I had been unable to get Talc Alf out of my mind and was desperate to let him know that his gift had been delivered. The solution came to me out of the blue. I would ring Macca.

On the morning of Sunday 3 June I rang the ABC (we were by now all getting to know each other) and was put straight through to Australia All Over. It was a great success. I told the story, saying what a pleasure it was to be able to thank Talc Alf with two million people listening in. I reckoned that Talc Alf would be listening but even if he wasn't, he would hear about it quick smart.

My breakfast that morning was Mocha coffee and half a glass of tomato juice. Lunch was a Muslie Bar and water.

Later in the day I passed a camp with a few transportables behind a high barbed wire fence. It didn't look very inviting. I hung around the gate for a while but when nobody appeared I decided to press on.

I came to a geothermal power plant but everybody had moved to a new site about ten kilometres away and it appeared to have closed down. Apparently the drilling rig had fouled and they were waiting for a new one from America.

With the road the only feature on the landscape, I had to string my antenna from a road sign. It was a lonely campsite. There were no trees, no wood for a campfire, nothing. My tent stuck out like an igloo in a desert.

CHAPTER 15

Overtaken by a bash

4 – 9 June, days 61 – 66

(Innamincka – Lat 27:44.631 Long: 140:44.283)

At the turnoff to Burkes Grave I could see the Merninie Range about twenty kilometres away, rising to two hundred metres. Coopers Creek was running pretty well east-west and Innamincka was about a kilometre from the creek. You get an idea of the size of this country when you realise that the 297,000 square kilometre Coopers Creek catchment constitutes almost a quarter of the Lake Eyre basin, spreading into Queensland, South Australia and a sliver of north-west New South Wales.

I was in Innamincka by 10am, conscious of fulfilling a dream – it had always been on my 'must visit' list.

I was taking some photographs when two carloads of people gathered around to swap yarns.

I wandered over to the hotel, dumped my gear on a closed-in verandah, bought a Solo and read through the notices on the wall. Among the announcements was a variety bash for the Flying Doctor which was due in town on Wednesday, two days away. I would prolong my stay until then. The pub's menu, I noted, was extensive and reasonably priced.

The general store was also well stocked by which I mean that noodles and soups were in abundance. There was also plenty of meat, bread, pies and sausage rolls. No fear of starving here, I decided. Four-wheel-drives were queuing at the store's bowsers for petrol and diesel at prices that would have made Bill Gates blanche.

I invested in a sausage roll with sauce and, pulling my pack back on, I left for a detailed inspection of Innamincka. Given that Mitchell Street is the only street in town my tour did not take long. However, I did find the promised

Laundromat and tyre place. Both were closed.

My eye was taken by a fascinating looking building. A sign proclaimed it as 'Cooper Creek Homestay – Accommodation Innamincka' but it was the architecture that attracted me. It was old style, but it appeared to have been built in the last ten years from a rather eclectic assortment of materials.

'G'day!'

He had appeared from nowhere and was looking at me with an inquiring eye.

'Oh, G'day. I was just looking to see what the building is.'

'I'm Geoff,' he said. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'I'm Jeff too. That'd be good. Actually coffee, if that's okay.'

It transpired that Geoff Matthews was a nomad-at-heart – *is* a nomad-at-heart might be a more accurate description. He and his wife Julie and their two kids had wandered the continent for years before buying a block in Innamincka and starting up their home-stay. They had scrounged enough 'materials and useful things' to build their enterprise, which could now comfortably accommodate thirty people and feed them three times a day. Their Oka, transformed into a campervan-home, was parked outside.

It was a wonderful place with an assortment of rooms, each with a personal touch such as a jug of water and a glass on a doily alongside the beds. The dining room was quite magnificent with high ceilings and a smattering of pioneer relics which looked as though they were still in use.

I was very taken with it and, after a coffee and toasted sandwiches, I offered my services in exchange for somewhere to erect my tent.

'Done,' said Geoff.

I set up my tent at the back behind the outdoor entertainment area, and dined on lasagna. Julie, I decided, was a great cook.

Next morning I fixed the winch on Geoff's Oka. It had been malfunctioning for a long time due to burnt out wiring.

I met Peter Ware who owns and runs Cooper Discoverer Cruises – Innamincka and, after chatting for a while, he went off to fetch a few things he said needed fixing. He came back with a small 240V plug-pack battery charger with a blown internal fuse. That was a piece of cake.

He also came up with a bigger capacity battery charger which had clearly been built as a result of some Aussie ingenuity. It has to be appreciated that there was no 240V town supply – the people generated their own power however they could. Peter had a 'gen-set' run on petrol which he ran when using power tools, and a small solar panel and batteries for lights. When the gen-set was working, he plugged in his previously mentioned charger which was

really a 240V washing machine motor, mechanically coupled to a car alternator. Ingenious – it charged his batteries very quickly. I was most impressed.

Peter invited me to join his afternoon river cruise as a guest. He introduced me to about thirty people which was decent of him because they handed round the hat and contributed $90 for DeafBlind.

Julie, meanwhile, was preparing for a full house during Wednesday's charity bash. The local hotel could not accommodate everybody and Cooper Creek Homestay was taking the overflow. I helped where I could with preparing the rooms.

The homestay, which was off the main road, had no signs around the town with the result that it was often overlooked by visitors who made straight for the hotel. I offered to set up a web site for them so that if somebody looked up 'Innamincka accommodation' they would at least be visible.

'Just a few pictures and contact information.' I said.

Julie was in favour but Geoff wasn't so sure. He preferred the low profile.

However, Julie and I agreed to set it up. 'Once he sees it, he'll accept it,' said Julie.

I got on the phone and a few hours later www.coopercreekhomestay.com was born. I donated my costs – and they were both delighted with the web site.

*

Geoff was up early to start the generator and get the fire going. I was particularly grateful for the fire – the temperature had bottomed at four degrees. He also loaned me some warm clothes.

I joined him in his ute for a trip to the local airstrip to meet a twin-engine charter plane with the weekly mail. Geoff had the contract to collect the mail for the townspeople.

Later in the day the bash vehicles began limping into town. The support vehicles were four-wheel-drives but the participating ones were old Holdens and Fords and sundry other makes. They were looking decidedly travel-stained after negotiating rain-affected bush and station tracks. There was frantic activity all over town as the vehicles were made ready for the next day's torture.

I mingled with the mob, enjoying the excitement the event was generating. I met a bloke called Steve Corney who offered to help me if ever I was in trouble. I made a note of this because he had a Tyres and More in New South Wales which specialised in preparing bash vehicles. (I phoned Steve much later, asking him to select and prepare a 1994 VR Holden for me to retrace my walk with Bill. He did all of this, even delivering the vehicle to Bill in Newcastle).

Wednesday night was a big night at the pub. Every year the organisers

receive dozens of donated prizes which are auctioned to raise money. Julie and I went along to watch the antics. There were about three hundred people there, a couple of them dressed as clowns. It was very light-hearted though some of the prizes were valuable; one was an overseas holiday for two.

I was persuaded, in the middle of this jollity, to go on stage and say a few words about my own expedition.

It was late in the night when I returned to my tent to grab some sleep.

*

It was all hustle and bustle next morning with the bash crowd downing breakfast, packing their luggage and doing last minute tinkering under raised car bonnets. It was the same in the kitchen. I noticed that the ratio of males to females was about 50:1 in favour of the former.

Apart from the first six kilometres to the airstrip, the Cordillo Downs road was little used. Once past the airstrip it straightens and heads pretty well north-north-east.

I crossed the Cooper at the causeway and was amazed at the amount of water running through the pipes under the road. I had been told that occasionally, perhaps once or twice a year, it is several metres over the road and spreads kilometres wide. Later in the day, when heavy cumulus clouds obscured the sun, I began thinking of this. I could see rain falling in the west and felt the cold wind tugging at my clothing.

In mid-afternoon I caught up with a herd of about six brumbies. I had been watching them in the distance, nibbling at nothing I could see. When I was within about thirty metres of them they wandered across the road in front of me. They stayed level with me for fifteen minutes, never taking their eyes off me. They finally tired of the game and fell back, grazing on clumps of grey grass growing among the stones. If the clouds brought rain they would soon be feasting on fresh green pasture.

I wore my plastic top and trackies until late in the afternoon when I came to a significant, though unnamed creek crossing.

Several vehicles stopped; one bloke reckoned my picture had been used as a backdrop on last night's Sky Television.

I covered only fifteen kilometres before setting up camp for the night. It seemed that every first day after a stay-over was the same – it made me think that I must soften up very quickly.

*

It was so cold during the night I had to sleep in my trackies, socks, beanie and woollen gloves and with the sleeping bag zippered right up. Even then I had to keep rubbing my legs to restore some circulation. Well before dawn I

gave up trying to sleep and spent fifteen minutes groping around in the dark for firewood. In the process I managed to convince myself that this was much more fun than lying in a sleeping bag waiting for the sun to rise, and that I wasn't all that cold anyway.

I soon had a roaring fire. I pulled some of it away for cooking and boiled the billy for morning coffee. I also stuffed myself with fruit cake which I had bought at the general store – my justification was that I had always intended eating it quickly to get rid of 600 grams weight from my shoulders.

I was away early, crossing bare stony country in which little grew or survived. I hadn't gone far when I came to Watchiepondrinie Creek (another wonderful name that rolls off the tongue). The approaches were muddy and the creek was running after the recent rains. I thought I might have to wade across but when I scouted fifty metres downstream I found a place where I could skip stone to stone to the other side.

A couple towing a caravan stopped for a prolonged chat which was more than welcome as I had been pushing myself pretty hard.

I walked steadily until late afternoon then set up camp near a creek bed close to where Bookabourdie underground gas pipeline crosses the road. I call it a road though it was by now little more than two tyre tracks slowly curving a tad east of north.

I was still feeling a happy camper. I had covered only twenty kilometres in the day but that was unimportant. I had hot soup, noodles and coffee for dinner, the weather was holding off and I was handling the walk well. As I sat staring into the fire I thought I could understand why people who go adventuring do it again and again. It gets into your blood and there are times when you think there is nothing else you would rather do.

*

Chris from Santos dropped in to my camp with a food parcel containing two apples, an orange and a banana. He had stopped yesterday and had promised to catch up on his way back from Moomba.

I had just established my noon position and was having a break on the side of the road when a well-equipped four-wheel-drive pulled over. A tall young man in his late thirties hopped out and, with outstretched hand, said, 'Hans Hilversum from Holland.'

He said he was on his second trip to Australia and that this time, he was checking out the middle bits.

I said, 'How about a cuppa?'

I had the billy on the fire before he had his gas stove and water out of his vehicle. However, he did beat me with the cream biscuits. He showed me his

personal EPIRB (a GME MT310) which cost $250. When I mentioned this to Bill later, it started the whole EPIRB discussion going again. Hans and I must have chatted for two hours before deciding it was time we were on our way.

The country was flat and uninteresting, the sky was clear and there was no wind. However, I was still wearing my trackies, though I had dispensed with the plastic top.

I passed the road that went one kilometre east to Bartons Well, a good water source. I would have topped up my reserves there except that Hans had insisted I take his water – we had used mine for our tea break.

My road was again heart-breakingly straight, disappearing to a distant point on the horizon. I say 'heart-breaking' only because viewing it like that seems to make distance so much further. If there is a bend coming up, it is something to aim for, even to look forward to reaching. But when the road goes on and on and on, it can become almost hypnotic. Even when I reached the first of three branches of Baintree Creek, there was nothing to see except some dead trees which, in their prime, had reached the lofty height of about two metres.

At 4pm I called it a day at the aforementioned creek's third branch. It had been only a twenty-kilometre day but that was all right, I was not in a record-breaking mood. I was enjoying myself immensely and the longer this walk took the better. I just had to make sure I finished before the onset of the wet season.

CHAPTER 16

A historic woolshed

10 – 14 June, days 67 – 71

(Candradecka Creek – Lat: 27:14.573 Long: 140:50.739)

I had a fire going well before the sun came up. I had to, it was bloody cold.

Patchawara bore, with a working windmill and a dam, offered good drinking water but I had plenty and I walked straight past, feeling a little smug.

A major road off to the left went to Keleary oil fields which are connected by pipeline to Moomba. In fact, there were numerous gas and oil wells, all of them low production. The gas and oil comes to the surface and through the pipes under their own pressure, making the fields relatively cheap to operate. It's a busy area: Santos alone was drilling ten new bores every week.

It was approaching morning tea time when a vehicle stopped with two men and a woman, all of whom wanted to chat. They dashed off to find wood for a fire but I again had my billy going well before they got back. No matter – the lady produced some excellent cake and biscuits.

We were about to say our farewells when the lady brought up the subject of religion. I told her I was a dedicated atheist and had no need for it, but this merely raised the light of battle in her eyes. Her husband, who could see a beautiful friendship dissolving on the spot, said, 'Don't start that now, Dear.' She took the hint, the subject was allowed to drop, and we went our separate ways.

I don't know whether it was the discussion or the cake and biscuits but I put in a solid afternoon's effort and covered 26.5 kilometres in the day.

I spent the evening reflecting on the different people one meets in the Australian outback. I'd spent two hours yakking to a Dutchman I could have talked to all day, and a suburban housewife who was hanging out for her next Sunday church service.

*

Next morning I crossed Candradecka Creek at the bore and dam and decided to catch up on some housekeeping.

Leaving my pack against a signpost I took off my shoes and socks, gathered up all my dirty shirts and jocks and headed for the dam. Finding some relatively clear water, I washed everything, wrung it all out and headed back to my pack. As there was no clothes line (I would have been waiting too long for them to dry, anyway) I poked the freshly-washed laundry into strap holders on the outside of the pack. I then returned to the dam and filled my water bottles. For the first time since leaving Port Augusta, I dropped a purification tablet into each bottle – just to be on the safe side. Actually, I reckoned I would have got away with it because there were ducks using the dam.

Just before midday a large windmill came into view. I checked my map – Mulga bore. A lone windmill in an otherwise empty, perfectly flat landscape! It was the emptiness that I loved; that and the redness of the land and the blue of the sky.

I passed the remains of a caravan chassis off the side of the road. I wondered how much heartbreak there had been: a shattered holiday? a serious injury? Whoever it was would have waited a long time for help.

I camped at Leap Year bore which boasted a dilapidated tank and a cattle yard where fifty head waited for goodness knows what. The only suitable place for my tent was the side road to the cattle yard and even that was lousy with double-gees. I cleared an area but then discovered that the road had been compacted so hard I couldn't get my tent pegs into it.

I slept well – I had covered twenty-eight kilometres. A good effort, I told myself.

*

I passed a road off to my right which led to the New South Wales border, a kilometre away. It was the closest I would get to that State.

The 'road' had by now deteriorated to two deep tyre tracks which made it extremely difficult for two vehicles to pass each other.

Three French tourists stopped in a four-wheel-drive and gave me some fruit. Seizing on some half-remembered schoolboy French I said, '*Merci pour le pomme de terre.*' It wasn't until I saw their puzzled looks that I realised I had thanked them for a potato. I was sort of saved by my dreadful accent – they thought I was asking if they had any spuds.

They were about to drive off when a couple of motorbikes arrived, totally blocking the road. The leader was dressed more like a chauffeur than a bikie or a bushie. His machine was big and magnificent. He was removing his gloves

and helmet when another eight motorcyclists stopped. It was a tag-along bike tour of the outback.

We were all chatting together when another two four-wheel-drives pulled over, bearing four elderly adventurers.

I shook my head in amazement. One moment I had Australia to myself, the next I was surrounded by three Frenchmen, ten motorcyclists and four grey nomads.

It was a busy day. A young family with a toddler stopped soon after lunch and at 3pm, I was joined by a six-wheel-drive bus full of tourists travelling with a company called Oscar's Outback Tours By Jingo.

'Come in and tell us your story,' they said. Ever eager to oblige, I addressed them in the bus and they handed round a hat for donations to the cause.

The sandhills started again but they were short, ran in all directions and supported tufts of dead-looking grass. The road widened a little and headed north with a little bit of west, taking it away from the New South Wales border.

*

The following morning conditions were overcast and a light wind was finding its way through every gap in my clothing, chilling me to the bone. I stoked my fire and, when I had Roger on air, I asked him to check satellite images and get an area forecast for aviation. It was handy having an aeronautical mate.

As I packed my gear heavy rain-bearing clouds were threatening from the west and south-west. I was on the road by 9am and walked non-stop until midday.

I arrived at a major T-junction which was signposted showing Birdsville off to my left. I unpacked and checked the maps; the road going straight ahead led to Planet Downs and Arabury Station and on to the Windora-Birdsville road. My maps did not cover that area. I noticed a significant creek ahead of me and I could see that the road curved to the right, following the tree line. Another check with the map showed that the road followed the creek for a kilometre before crossing back again and curving west to Cordillo Downs Station. This was the road I needed.

The road remained sandy and corrugated while the country was mainly scrubby with a few trees along the dry creek beds. I was still not alone: a couple in a motor home stopped and gave me a pear and an orange.

When I arrived at Marianna waterhole I knew I had found my campsite for the night. It was beautiful, at least two hundred metres long and ten metres wide. It was lined with trees filled with squabbling cockatoos and galahs. I did a load of washing and strung it over a tree limb to dry.

*

I started my next morning knowing that Cordillo Downs was about twenty-eight kilometres away and expecting to arrive there the following day. The road was now perfectly flat but fringed with dry grass like hair around an old man's head. It was the only vegetation in sight.

Needle Creek boasted a sign but it had been flattened by a recent flood – a recurring problem perhaps?

Early in the afternoon a five-tonne truck pulled over. It was relatively clean, obviously well maintained, and it bore the sign:

Outback Motorcycle Services
Business For Sale

Terry, the owner-operator, said that he had been running the business for years and had only recently decided to put it up for sale. I quizzed him about the viability of such a business, taking into account the bad roads and vast distances. He had obviously experienced no problem. I wished him luck.

I was interested because I had sold several businesses in Broome from electronic repairs to retail music. The problem had always been finding a buyer with business acumen and a desire to live in a remote area.

I was surprised when, at 2.30pm, I saw the buildings of Cordillo Downs and its inevitable telephone mast. I seemed to have covered the twenty-eight kilometres very easily indeed.

At a 'Y' junction the road to the left was signed 'Birdsville and The Wool Shed'. As it veered away from the homestead it occurred to me that they were discouraging visitors, except to the heritage listed woolshed, the world's biggest. I hesitated but eventually took the left branch which crossed Marabooka Creek and skirted the station's accommodation by a full kilometre. I took a side road leading to the woolshed. I came to a fence with a gate which allowed only pedestrians through to see the shed. A sign said:

Cordillo Downs Woolshed
Constructed in 1833
You are welcome to inspect the woolshed.
Other buildings are private and are in use

I had been right: they did not encourage visitors interrupting their working lives. I had a good look around and took a lot of photographs of the restored but ageing woolshed. Then, figuring that the worst they could do was shoot me, I inched my way behind the woolshed towards the forbidden territory.

I did not need to stop at Cordillo Downs, I was loaded up with enough soup and noodles for the sixteen days it would take me to walk to Birdsville. But I was in the mood to pause and smell the roses and, more importantly, to meet the people who worked and lived there. This, after all, was Nowheresville. I was also very interested in the woolshed which is as big as an aircraft hangar. Its walls are of sandstone rubble and supported by massive buttresses. The corrugated iron roof is self-supporting with no vertical supports to limit the interior space. It is a monumental building in every respect.

I finally made it to the workshop and called out to a bloke working near the back of one of the buildings. It was Les, and he and his wife Veronica were employed by the station, Les as a general hand and Veronica as a cook. Les listened to my story and took me to the homestead to meet Janet Brook of Brook Properties. When I told her of my walk and my fundraising she immediately offered me a room and a feed.

Janet settled me into a spare room in the men's quarters. The men, she explained, were working at an out camp and would be back tomorrow. Her husband Anthony would be back that night.

'Dinner is at 6.30,' she said. 'See you over there.'

It was the start of an exciting two days at one of the most remote areas of human habitation, where people were doing the seemingly impossible and doing it well.

CHAPTER 17

Fixing a station's power problems

15 – 20 June, days 72 – 77

(Cordillo Downs – Lat: 26:42.376 Long: 140:37.497)

At breakfast I met Kylie, the head stockman's wife, who acted as governess helping Janet with the kids. I also used the station's internet-connected computer in the dining room to catch up with my email.

Anthony was heading back to the out camp to continue with mustering and branding. Unlike the old days when the boss rode out on a horse and reappeared weeks later, Anthony flew his Cessna seventy kilometres to the out camp, spotting cattle along the way. He landed at the out camp and organised the stockmen before flying back home for a cooked dinner and a warm bed. However, he now spent a couple of hours showing me around and discussing my task for the day.

The station has two diesel 44Kw generators which are set to start up from the homestead with a flick of a switch, thus saving a trip to the generator shed every morning. One generator would start remotely all right, but it would not bring the electricity on line. The other generator, which could be selected at the generator shed, would not always start. Armed with this information we looked over the equipment and Anthony gave me the operator's manual containing a selection of circuit diagrams that were more-or-less up to date.

I spent the next four hours studying the circuits and, from time to time, visiting the generator shed to look for corresponding circuit boards, relays and contactors. The on-line generator, which was extremely noisy, was running all day and I had to wear ear muffs when in the shed. I took readings with my multi-

meter but then had to go back to the men's quarters where it was relatively quiet, and work my way through the circuit diagrams.

Les, who was taking an interest in all of this, insisted that I report to him, asking if I was 'getting my head around the system'. I didn't tell him that I had never before worked on an auto-start generator system, though I had told Anthony.

When Anthony returned from the out camp I was ready to do some tests which required the system to be shut down and restarted so that I could check out the theories I had developed. After several tests I proved that the fault was with a main contactor which was getting the okay to pull in and connect the output to the station, but which was not operating. I was able to confirm this in several ways. Anthony was satisfied with my diagnosis and was confident that his supplier could get him a new contactor, and that he would be able to make the change himself.

With that resolved – or at least diagnosed – it was decreed that I should stay another day and have a crack at the other problem.

Meanwhile, the team from the out camp had returned in two four-wheel-drive utes and were busy servicing the vehicles and trail bikes they had used in mustering. This was a well-organised operation; I enjoyed watching the vehicles being washed of all the dirt and dust and getting their services in the clean, well-equipped workshop.

Dinner that night was a lively affair with the full crew at the table. The head stockman, known only as JJ, was a cross between a tough no-nonsense bossman and a clown. Pat and Olivia were an Irish couple living the Aussie outback adventure as a jackeroo and jillaroo. Dan and Kane were young fellers, one of whom claimed to have won prizes in motorbike riding at the 'Bronc and Bike' gymkhanas. Derek, who sported a thirty centimetre beard, was the quietest but I reckoned there were some interesting stories behind his hairy facade.

*

After another hearty breakfast – and there is nothing quite like a hearty breakfast when you've been living on hard rations for a while – I repaired to the generator shed to work out why the second motor would not start remotely. I repeated my back-and-forth routine, between the shed and the quiet of the men's quarters, working my way through the logic of the complex circuitry in an attempt to isolate the problem. Anthony spent some time with me learning how everything fitted together and stopping or starting the motors.

I eventually isolated a pair of contacts that allowed number one generator to start if number two generator was not working. We achieved this with the help of portable UHF radios – Anthony and I were in the generator shed telling

Janet in the homestead when to flick the start switch. Again, Anthony could see the intermittent operation of the break contacts and was happy to order the necessary spare part.

*

Being a Sunday there was little early morning movement at the station so, grabbing my camera, I began photographing some of the station buildings. They were fascinating – even the modern ones were designed to compliment the original architecture.

It was 10am before I had eaten, packed and said my farewells. I left, carrying a plastic shopping bag of luxuries Veronica had put together for me which included some jerky, which I promised to try. I did – I can best describe it as 'interesting'. It was something to chew, it was not heavy, it was sort of tasty and it titillated my taste buds better than a sip of warm water – which is about far as I'm prepared to go with the stuff.

The flat, pebbly road seemed to wander aimlessly off into the flat drabness of Lake Eyre Basin and the channel country's Diamantina, Georgina and Cooper catchments. For many, the landscape would appear incredibly monotonous but I saw it as an exciting taste of the type of country I would now be crossing. I was approaching the real centre of the great brown land.

The sky, meanwhile, grew more overcast as the day progressed so that by 2pm, it was damned near dark and I reckoned I was going to get rain again before I reached Birdsville.

I camped that night alongside Bull Hole Creek – a quiet spot where I was able to reflect on what life would be like on a remote station such as Cordillo Downs.

*

I awoke to a glorious sunrise. It was still overcast but the clouds were as rosy as parrot plumage, allowing sunrays to divide and subdivide the heavens with geometric precision. It was very beautiful, accentuated no doubt by the dusky monotony of the land being illuminated.

Switching my mind to more pragmatic matters I decided to change the 2 AAA GPS batteries. They had served me well – ten weeks, in fact.

My road meandered across the desert, heading north-east to north-west until it reached Nattere Creek from where it ran straight as a die for ten kilometres to Providence Creek. 'Providence' had a main channel running a metre deep but there were many smaller channels giving it an overall width of two kilometres. It was not a good place to be caught in a flash flood.

A four-wheel-drive pulled over with a present from Julie at Innamincka. You will remember that Julie and her husband Jeff (Nomad at Heart) Matthews

A broad, flat land strectching in every direction.

were running a home-stay and had made me welcome. I now silently blessed both of them – the treat they had prepared for me included small slices of fruit cake individually-wrapped in Glad Wrap, Mentos, an assortment of confectionery and two litres of bottled water.

The stony desert went on and on. Mostly it was flat rolling plains though sometimes there were flat-topped hillocks several metres high. It was a sort of moonscape except that every once in a while I came across an abandoned box trailer or car chassis. They were reminders that things which broke down in this country stayed there.

When I stopped for lunch I was joined by a crow which strutted to within a few metres of me to check me out. Alongside us were the rusting remains of what had once been a truck's front mudguard. I thought: what a picture! One crow, one bearded traveller with a solar panel on his chest and one discarded

mudguard – there was surely a McCubbin in that.

*

Tuesday,18 June dawned cold and sapphire clear. The air seemed almost to crackle as the sun struggled to warm the endless landscape. Clutching a plastic top to my body and with my sleeping bag draped over my shoulders, I got a roaring fire going then stamped up and down on the spot while my billy boiled.

Three Cordillo Downs vehicles passed, raising clouds of dust. And I could hear an aircraft circling; it was Andrew spotting cattle and directing vehicles over the radio. I spoke to him briefly over my hand-held UHF radio.

I drank hot tea, struck camp and resumed my walk. I was now crossing the Sturt Stony Desert, an appropriately named feature given that the ground slowly turned to small stones stretching from horizon to horizon. Seen from the comfort of a car it would have appeared rather wonderful but I couldn't help thinking it was one helluva place for a lone walker to strike trouble. This was the so-called gibber plain.

A car pulled up with another parcel from Julie at Innamincka. The driver said jokingly that he had stopped at her homestay and she had charged him with delivering her gift on pain of death. I wept a little after he had gone; how could I ever repay such thoughtfulness?

Late in the afternoon I came to Koonabera Creek, a wide watercourse with a steep bank which nature seemed to have carved specifically to shelter me from the cold southerly wind. I stretched my antenna between the only two trees in sight and weighted one end with a heavy rock. That done, I gathered firewood and lit yet another campfire. It was a good spot, I was able to huddle into the bank, and there was plenty of firewood to keep me warm until I could crawl into my sleeping bag.

It was a four-hour walk next morning to the historic Cadelga Homestead which, like Cordillo Downs, is also heritage listed. I had arranged to stay the night at the Cordillo Downs ringers' out camp but first I had a good poke around what was left of the old homestead.

Solid walls still stood proudly against the blue sky and I found a massive fireplace where the station people would once have yarned away their long evenings. It was so easy to stand alone in such a place listening to the sigh of the wind, and imagining the tough resourceful pioneers making their plans to tame a country that threatened to engulf them at every turn. I found the rusting remains of an ancient Austin car that had been worked into the ground and abandoned. There were broken down windmills and, oddly, a modern solar panel-powered bore pump.

Cordillio Downs was once the biggest sheep station in the country, sprawling across seven thousand eight hundred square kilometres of some of the harshest land in Australia. Its lease was taken up in 1878 and within twelve years it was grazing eighty five thousand sheep. Wool was taken by camels to the nearest railhead six hundred kilometres away. The twelve hundred kilometre round trip took two months. Today 'Cordillo' runs maybe seven thousand Shorthorn cattle. Cadelga, its satellite, which is a mere twenty kilometres from the Queensland border, was also established in 1878. In the 1930s it was used by the Royal Geographical Society as an observation point for the transit of Venus.

I dragged myself away from this nostalgic place and began looking for the promised out-camp. When I could find no trace of it I called them up on my UHF radio and asked directions, explaining that I could not see them from the road. Fortunately, I established immediate contact and was directed almost a kilometre off the road to where vehicles and tents were circled around a blazing fire.

It was a wonderful evening. There was an excellent stew bubbling on the fire, fallen trees had been dragged into position behind a ring of chairs as a wind shelter, and the yarns flowed in the easy drawl of the Australian outback.

CHAPTER 18

Confronting a dingo

21 – 30 June, days 78 – 87

(Shallow Lake, 98km E. of Birdsville – Lat: 25:49.500 Long: 139:20.109)

My morning at Cadelga was somewhat Spartan.

There was plenty of stew left over from the previous night and, because it was so cold, it had kept as well as if it had been in a fridge. I had three helpings which may sound greedy but I was assured that if it wasn't eaten it would be thrown out. The shower was behind three sheets of corrugated iron and boasted a timber pallet for a floor but no roof. Water was delivered from a 200-litre drum by a bilge pump powered by a car battery. The resulting tepid trickle was sufficient to ensure that one became wet but fell well short of combating the frigid wind whipping around the corrugated iron. The art lay in lathering up and rinsing down before the onset of hypothermia. It was the sort of shower which often prompts the victim – once dried and dressed – to declare himself invigorated. You get my meaning. I made just that remark, adding that it was nice to feel clean again.

After my teeth had stopped chattering I was again interviewed by Graham from Wireless Australia for the organisation's Sunday broadcast.

I left Cadelga squeaky clean, my stomach filled with reconstituted stew, and – thanks to the shower – unusually perky. I was also in an expectant frame of mind because the day was something of a landmark; I would be crossing the South Australian-Queensland border. This milestone had perhaps assumed more importance to me than the occasion warranted because reaching the place where the boundary lines met proved anti-climactic in the extreme. I don't know what I was expecting but when I looked around and found only a gap in the fence to mark The Spot, I felt let down.

However, the moment was saved by the arrival of a four-wheel-drive

bearing Les, the first bloke I had met at 'Cordillo'. He was driving to Birdsville to pick up Veronica's daughter at the airstrip and take her back to Cordillo, a round trip of about five hundred kilometres. Les passed over a parcel of goodies including fruit, biscuits, and enough nuts to satisfy an orangutan. My spirits were restored, and I decided that given the choice between a brass band to greet me at the border and Les' parcel, I would have chosen the parcel any time.

Soon after Les drove off, a movement on the side of the road caught my eye. It was the second snake I had come across since leaving Port Augusta. I quickly found my camera and, moving very slowly so as not to alarm the creature, I crept in for a close-up. It was a young one, about twenty-five centimetres long with a distinctive black head and dull brown body. I had no idea what kind it was but, throwing caution to the wind, I eased my camera to within centimetres of its head, hoping it would cooperate with a suitably impressive pose. The Joe Blake was not interested and, just as I snapped its picture, it reared to attack. My retreat was as ungainly as it was spectacular and I left the scene muttering about the snake's ingratitude, hoping never to encounter one that was fully grown.

I camped at the only place I could find that was clear of stones. It was a bleak spot but far away on the horizon I could see a large body of water shimmering in the afternoon light. There was a similar expanse off to the east. One was Moonda Lake, the other Shallow Lake. They were most impressive but when I drove back three months later there was no water, just a vast area of green in the otherwise brown landscape. I had to make do with a road sign to support one end of my antenna, and a broken rusty star picket for the other end. It was a sad-looking arrangement but to my surprise, it worked; my trusty little Yeasu 817 radio transmitted 1500 kilometres to Bill and Roger with no trouble at all. Bill said that my tent zipper problem had been solved. (The zipper had failed about a month earlier leaving me open to draughts and mosquitoes). Toby at Go Camping had been in touch with the suppliers and they were air freighting a new tent inner to Birdsville.

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I emerged from my tent next morning for another brass monkey start to the day. The problem was that there was not a skerrick of firewood to start a fire for a warming brew. I do not demand much in the way of creature comforts – skipping breakfast never worries me – but I do enjoy a hot cup of tea or coffee to warm my insides.

I sighed heavily, told myself for the umpteenth time 'Get used to it, Jeff', packed up as best I could and set off at a brisk pace to bring my temperature up. Watching me was a small herd of cattle which looked in good nick despite

the total lack of vegetation. It occurred to me that they were probably feeling better than me.

I came to a T-junction 114 kilometres from Birdsville where, incongruously, two Sulo bins stood side-by-side, apparently awaiting the arrival of a council rubbish truck. I have to admit that they stopped me in my tracks. There was no building, habitation, settlement or traveller within sight (and I could see a long way) and there was no reason for a vehicle to stop here. Nothing happened here, in fact if it wasn't for the gravel road, the view stretching endlessly in every direction had probably remained unchanged for ten thousand years or more. So why place not one, but two Sulo bins at this lonely intersection? Surely the Birdsville Council wouldn't send a truck on a 228-kilometre round trip to empty them! The mind of the long distance walker can be exercised for a very long time over such conundrums. Mine was.

There was more evidence of seemingly pointless highway 'trappings'. I passed signs warning of road trains and 'crests', yet from my perspective at ground level I could see no indication of crests. I came to a truck parking bay with a table, seating and composting toilet which was fair enough – but there was another similarly-equipped stop fifteen kilometres further along the track. After that, nothing.

Traffic was now starting to increase. I had previously seen perhaps a couple of vehicles a day but now there was anything up to twenty. It was significant, I thought, that when there were only two or three vehicles a day the drivers invariably stopped for a chat. Not any more, I was lucky to get a wave. I was approaching Birdsville, an out-of-way spot by most standards but, nevertheless, a population centre where people were too busy to pull over for some drifter with a pack on his back.

However, I refused to dwell on the matter, particularly when three Cordillo Downs vehicles stopped with competitors for the Birdsville horse and bike gymkhana. They were brimming with confidence, fully expecting to clean up in the bike events. They always had in the past, they said. I wished them luck while gratefully accepting a food parcel containing cake and sandwiches, compliments of Veronica and the 'Cordillo' kitchen.

I camped that night at one of the previously-mentioned parking bays where the 'accommodation' was rough but the 'en suite' irresistible.

Next day I walked thirty-one kilometres across country that was beginning to show promise of a more interesting landscape – it was starting to lose its flatness. I wouldn't go as far as to say there were hills but there were definitely undulations. However, even they were not what you would call spectacular; I estimated that the crests were five metres above the hollows. But,

as I have said before, everything is relative and to my mind the country was now bordering on hilly.

On the morning of Sunday, 23 June I made sat phone contact with Macca for another interview on 'Australia All Over'. Reception was good and the interview went well. He now remembered me and was taking an interest in my walk – and I was able to give DeafBlind a mention or two.

Soon afterwards I tuned in to the WIA amateur radio broadcast and spoke to Felix on the talk back session. Felix was the news operator based in Queensland and he too had become accustomed to me calling in.

Back on the track I came to a road sign notifying me that in five kilometres I would have an opportunity to over-take. Sure enough, when an hour later I breasted a small rise, there was a long, straight bitumen road stretching to the horizon. A second sign warned me against parking in the next 1.5 kilometres. I was about to walk the length of an emergency airstrip.

Such strips are taken for granted in outback Australia. Straight sections of public road are sealed, widened and marked with white lines for Royal Flying Doctor Service planes which fly in to pick up patients and transport them to hospitals. I'm not sure what British or European travellers make of them, they must shake their heads in dismay.

If I had been in any doubt that I was approaching civilisation it was dispelled the next day when, out of the blue, there appeared a sign:

BIRDSVILLE BAKERY
Award winning Pies
CUPLA MILES

It was actually thirty kilometres not a 'cupla miles' to Birdsville and its promised bakery, but my taste buds got the message. My mouth was already watering.

A young couple, Denis and Juliet, who were passing through must have sensed my hunger pangs because they pulled over and gave me an apple and two litres of chilled water. They were newcomers to outback travel and had difficulty comprehending that I had walked four hundred kilometres from Innamincka with only one replenishment stop at Cordillo Downs.

I established camp that night in a creek bed with soft sand for the tent, an abundance of firewood, and trees from which to hang my antenna. Relishing these rare comforts I finished my nightly rituals and was about to climb into my sleeping bag when a dingo howled a few hundred metres away to the west. I had heard some shorter howls several times on previous nights and had paid

them little attention, but this one was different. It made me uneasy because I knew that a hungry pack was quite capable of launching an attack, particularly with the smell of food around. Guessing that the dingo was on a sandhill which I could see outlined in the half-light, I built up the fire and ventured a short distance from the camp, suddenly very much on the alert. The dingo howled again, a long drawn out howl which chilled my blood. This continued for all of ten minutes, long howls followed by brief silences in which all I could hear was the crackling of my fire.

The howling eventually stopped and I returned to the fire, threw on even more wood and crawled into my sleeping bag. I had just convinced myself that the dingo had probably been celebrating the onset of the mating season and was not in the least hungry, when another long howl split the night's stillness like a ship's fog horn, this time from the east.

With visions of a dingo pack circling my camp, I scrambled out of my sleeping bag and found a couple of stout sticks and some small rocks which I placed just outside the tent as weapons. I then piled more wood on the blaze and took another tentative walk around the periphery of firelight before returning to the protection of my suddenly flimsy tent.

The howling continued.

It seems silly now but I have to admit that the loneliness of my campsite and the unearthly howling of the dingo reduced me to a state of considerable fear. I wasn't a shivering wreck but I certainly felt that my nerves were stretched about as far as they were intended to go. I figured that all I could do was to keep the fire blazing and stay alert. This I did until about midnight when the howling stopped as suddenly as it had started. Gradually I relaxed, finally falling asleep alongside the biggest damned campfire in Australia.

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When I poked my head outside the tent next morning there was a crow perched in a nearby tree watching my every move. When I began packing up it hopped from branch to branch, the better to see what I was doing. Every now and then it cocked its head as though mystified by the behaviour of the odd-looking creature that had invaded its territory. A flock of parrots heralded their arrival with much shrieking and squabbling. They were obviously not far away yet I was unable to see them which was odd considering the flatness of the country.

Of the dingo there was no sign whatsoever. I searched for footprints half expecting to find its trail circling my camp but there was nothing. It was almost as though I had dreamed the whole episode. I knew I hadn't, but the day was so perfect it was difficult to imagine my creek bed as anything but a bushman's

paradise. It's surprising how a sunny morning, an inquisitive crow and the sweet smell of a campfire can place a different complexion on things.

I killed the fire, had a last look around and, hauling my pack on to my back, hit the road for Birdsville, only fifteen kilometres away. As though in celebration of my up-beat mood the gravel again turned to bitumen; I was re-entering the world of man.

I came to the famous Birdsville Racecourse. I say famous because its annual race day has been referred to as the Interior's Melbourne Cup. However, when I walked past it on the morning of 26 June it was as dead as a dodo – brown, flat, featureless – a totally uninspiring dustbowl. Yet each year in August or September, Birdsville in general and the racecourse in particular, spring to life in spectacular fashion for the Birdsville Races. It is a tradition that stretches back to 1882 when 150 station owners, managers, stockmen and Aborigines gathered for the first meeting. The bookies later held a settling in 'Mr Tucker's Hotel', then another meeting was called in the town's iron store resulting in the formation of a jockey club. No fewer than forty-two people joined the club that very day. The event has grown in popularity and now attracts hundreds of people from all over Australia. Some drive to the town, some travel by bus and many fly there in private aircraft, parking them in a long line near the town's airstrip. Marquees and tents are erected, every available bed is taken, copious amounts of beer are downed to slake healthy thirsts (they use a front end loader to clear up the discarded cans after the meeting), colourful bookies spruik their odds – even games of cricket have been organised in the outer. Proceeds from the race are donated to the local hospital and Royal Flying Doctor Service.

But today, 26 June, the racecourse shimmered under the midday sun, the only movement an occasional willy-willy, the only sound the mournful calling of crows.

The racecourse is near the intersection of the Birdsville Track and the road leading into the town. I turned right to Birdsville, crossed the little bridge over the Diamantina River and found myself in the town's 'outer suburb'.

Birdsville is one place I have always wanted to visit; it seems to signify everything the Australian bushie finds beguiling. The isolation, the extremes in climate, the aura of the outback – Birdsville is surely the heart and soul of the red centre which I had now been calling home for some weeks. I remembered a tragic event in 1963 when the Page family's car broke down on the track, resulting in Mum, Dad and their three kids setting out on foot for Birdsville, with no water and no shade. Their bodies were found one by one along the track, each shockingly dehydrated. A plaque bears testimony to their dreadful ordeal and the unforgiving nature of the country in these parts.

And so it was with more than my usual spirit of expectation that I pounded the bitumen to what I had come to see almost as a place of dreams.

For those who have not been there I should explain that Birdsville boasts about a hundred permanent residents, a small general store, medical clinic, two service stations, a gallery, café, bakery, caravan park, police station, primary school and a grassy oval which stands out in the surrounding gibber plain like an amethyst in a puddle of red paint. Not bad for a place clinging to the edge of the Simpson Desert and 1600 kilometres from the capital, Brisbane!

The airstrip is 1700 metres long and – of course – ends right outside the pub. People arriving by air can step from their aircraft, take a few paces through the blistering heat and be clutching a frosty beer before they have had time to raise a sweat.

As for the pub: there are any number of outback watering holes exuding the timeless character of the region, and the Birdsville Hotel is up there with the best of them. It houses more memorabilia than the British Museum. Well … not quite, but you get my drift. (When an hour or two later I started photographing the collection, my attention was politely, though emphatically, directed to a notice with an arrow pointing to a tin bearing the label: 'Taking of photos requires a $2 donation to the Flying Doctor'. I gladly obliged). The pub has been there since 1884, and I couldn't help wondering how many real life dramas and bushmen's tales had been played out within its cluttered walls.

But I am ahead of myself again. When I entered this shrine to thirst there were only a few people in the bar and they looked more like fixtures than customers. I slipped off my solar panel and backpack, a process which drew no more than a half-raised eyebrow among the drinkers, then wandered across to the bar and ordered an ice cold Solo. That had an impact though nobody actually said anything. I didn't care. It was a big glass, the ice rattled musically and there were droplets of moisture running down the side. The Solo was like a surge of fresh spring water through a parched paddock. I smacked my lips, burped appreciatively and ordered another.

Refreshed, I asked the barman if Ali was around. I knew that Bill had been in touch with her via email about sending a parcel and a new tent inner, and I was anxious to catch up with her.

Ali arrived with her manager Mark and we chatted for a while about my walk and Birdsville. I then retired to the dining room for a lunch of chicken and salad. It's amazing how good chicken and salad can taste after a few days on hard rations in the mulga. I had just finished eating when Ali came in with donations totalling $50 which had been handed to her by tourists I had met earlier. They had left without leaving their names.

Much refreshed, I collected my pack and walked the two blocks to the caravan park. I was approaching the office when the door opened and a couple emerged, obviously the owners.

'Geoff,' said the man, extending a hand.

'Yes, hi,' I replied.

'No, I'm Geoff … and this is Cath,' he said.

It emerged after this rather confusing exchange that Janne had phoned them the previous evening and arranged for me to stay at their caravan park. Geoff indicated a nicely grassed area near the office and amenities, and suggested I erect my tent there.

'It's not the usual camping area but it's the only place where there's any grass,' he said. He seemed somewhat embarrassed by this lack of greenery but I assured him that it would suit me very nicely.

We had just got that sorted out when another bloke wandered over.

'Jeff?' he said.

I was more cautious this time. 'Yes, I'm Jeff.'

'Talc Alf,' he said holding out his hand.

This nearly blew me away. 'Wow,' I said. 'You've saved me a very long trip. I was planning to get to Copley some day to thank you for that carving.'

'No, no, I'm not Talc Alf. I ran into him a while back and he's given me something for you.'

I scratched my head. 'This isn't my day for meeting new people,' I said.

'How come?'

'Doesn't matter. What have you got for me?'

He produced a small tourist-type sticker bearing an Australian flag and an Aboriginal flag where the Union Jack should have been. 'Talc gave me this and asked me to pass it on to you when I saw you. You're lucky; I was about to leave and I'd given up on seeing you.'

I smiled. Talc Alf seemed to have a genius for picking the right bloke to get things to me. I turned the sticker over and saw that he had drawn a stylised sunset and in a childish scrawl, written: 'Geoff'. I was touched. I placed it in my pack alongside his carving; they were two of the very few non-essential things I carried on my walk.

Later in the evening I met John and Judy who were on the caravan park staff. John was an amateur radio tragic who was understandably depressed given that his radio was away for repairs. However, we spent hours over the next few days chatting about our favourite subject. Needless to say he showed a keen interest in my equipment and the way I was keeping in touch with everybody.

I finished my first day in Birdsville doing my washing and having a

long hot shower. Geoff gave me coins for the machine and donated $30 to DeafBlind.

I spent four days in Birdsville so I think I can say that I got to know the place pretty well. I upgraded the ATM computer at the hotel; I returned my damaged tent to the store where I'd bought it (a replacement had arrived); and I spent a lot of time in a working museum examining a delightful collection of machinery ranging from water pumps to a donkey-powered chaff-cutter.

I also spent hours talking to Wolfgang John and his son Karston in the Big Red Café and Gallery. Wolfgang is one of Australia's most successful textile designers and he moved to Birdsville in 1993 to set up his Blue Poles Art Gallery. I was fascinated by his paintings which seemed to capture the mystery and vibrancy of the interior.

In the evenings we sat around the caravan park campfire swapping yarns and singing along with Judy on the guitar. On one such night I recounted my story of the howling dingo and was informed to my dismay that it was probably calling in other dingoes to lend a hand.

I left Birdsville on Saturday, 30 June. I had planned an early start but the farewells had been prolonged and, frankly, I'd found it hard to tear myself away. I had even submitted myself to a haircut and beard trim, courtesy of Judy. It had been my intention to remain unshaven until the end of my walk but I had to admit I was starting to look decidedly scruffy. Then I'd joined Mark, Ali and Chrissie at the pub for a hearty breakfast. As a result of all this it was 11.30am before I turned towards the Simpson Desert and resumed my walk. The little town in the middle of nowhere had found a place in my heart and would remain there for a long time.

I had walked about ten kilometres when a RAAF Hercules transport made a low circuit directly overhead. I would like to claim it was Birdsville's way of saying goodbye but I had already discovered that the little desert community received such salutes from passing aircraft almost daily.

I covered only seventeen kilometres that day but I didn't mind; I was happy to set up camp early and spend a few hours reflecting on Birdsville and the people I had met.

CHAPTER 19

Meeting the Mayor

1 – 11 July, days 88 – 98

(No map feature, 38km N of Birdsville – Lat: 25:33.437 Long: 139:23.738)

I hesitate to be continually complaining about the cold but hell, it was two degrees when I woke up. As though that were not bad enough, the landscape was bereft of firewood. I stamped my feet, blew into my hands and danced up and down like a performing bear in my efforts to restore some circulation. I even regretted having had my beard trimmed; at least it would have afforded some insulation. The sun was shining but it was the type of sunshine that seemed to accentuate the chill in the air rather than banish it. And there were cobwebs everywhere. They were festooned from my radio aerial, from shoots of greenery showing nervously above ground – they were even along the road. I would be following the silk route! I guessed there was a species of underground spider here that had adapted to the treeless country by releasing its web into the air, allowing it to stick wherever. I was contemplating this erudite deduction when a white ute pulled over with a male driver and passenger.

'G'day,' said the driver.

'G'day.'

'Got enough water?'

'Yer, ta.'

'Where ya headed?'

The passenger looked like a bloke who hadn't spent a lot of time in the gym. His name was Martin Kelly and he was the boss man for the ambulance coverage of the slice of country from Birdsville to Karumba, an area in which it would be possible to lose Belgium. We chatted for a while and he promised to alert all ambulance depots along my route, and tell them to keep a watch out for me. He told Bill later that he had been travelling the area for yonks and that

he had never before seen a bloke in his sixties, well on his way to conquering a south-north crossing on foot and without a support vehicle.

I came to a roadside dam which was full of respectable looking water. Dropping my pack, I took off my boots, slipped on my thongs and set off with a couple of two-litre bottles, intending to fill them. It should have been a simple operation but as so often happens in this part of the world, seemingly simple tasks can prove difficult. The problem was that I couldn't get anywhere near the water without sinking up to my fetlocks in oozing mud. I circumnavigated the hundred metre-long, man-made crater before giving up and returning to my boots. The water would have to wait. I set off again, carrying my boots and walking in thongs until my feet dried and I was able to wipe them reasonably clean. An hour or two later I found a beautiful waterhole with sandy banks and water that was so clear it positively sparkled.

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On 3 July I came to the Carcory Homestead. It had appeared on the flat, featureless horizon as a matchbox but as I came closer it materialised into a square, roofless ruin that presented about as desolate a face to the world as one could imagine. It was like a desert scene in Mexico, the kind that Hollywood likes to portray in westerns. The only things missing were prickly pear cactus and tumbleweed. I unloaded my pack and stood in awe of this monument to optimism, listening to the wind moaning through the building.

Carcory (sometimes spelt Cacoory) was established in 1877 as a pastoral run, a direct result of the search for Burke and Wills which in turn, resulted in intensive exploration of the area. The region contained some of the last unclaimed land in Queensland.

It's not known exactly when the homestead was built, but its simple architecture is typical of Central Australian buildings designed to counter the extremes of temperature with thick stone walls and wide verandahs. Erected near Carcory waterhole and right on the major stock route through Birdsville, the homestead consists of two main rooms under a hipped roof. It boasts a fireplace and chimney, and a front awning supported by posts.

About the turn of the century, pastoralist Sidney Kidman took up the Carcory run comprising 2600 square kilometres. It was closed in 1902 when three years of drought saw the station's entire stock of four thousand bullocks perish. In 1936 a Mr Morton, father of the present owner, took up the property but the homestead was already in ruins. Much of the building material had been removed for use at Glengyle Station after World War I, and the climate and vandals had finished the job.

Yet the walls still stand, the chimney pointing defiantly to the cloudless

sky, the fireplace intact. Thankfully, the old homestead is regarded as historically significant and enjoys a degree of protection. But once again, I was almost mesmerised by the sheer strength and perseverance of the early pioneers who had actually lived and worked there. I imagined them sitting on their verandah watching the sun die on a land that was all but dead, quietly smoking, yarning in low voices and probably thinking themselves fortunate to be allowed such solitude.

I pressed on. The road was now alternating from gravel to bitumen which I found disappointing: I was well into my journey yet the loneliness of the primitive tracks was behind me and I was walking on bitumen.

I was pondering this emergence into a world of comfort and sophistication when two four-wheel-drives carrying two families stopped just ahead of me with a squeal of brakes. I was asked all the usual questions to which I gave the usual replies, and I was preparing to move off when I noticed two little girls detach themselves from their parents and return to one of the vehicles. I assumed they were bored so I was surprised when they came back with some gold coins they had retrieved from an ashtray, and presented them as a donation. I was so touched by their thoughtfulness I didn't have the heart to tell them of my decision not to accept money along the road. I thanked them for their generosity, assuring them that every cent would go to DeafBlind.

The following day, Wednesday 4 July, was one of those red letter days that can only be fully appreciated by the lone traveller who has ventured into rough terrain.

My map indicated that there was something called Yamba Tank directly ahead and, as there was absolutely nothing else in the area, I began looking forward to it with the eagerness of a child awaiting his first glimpse of the sea. In fact, I became so excited at the prospect of actually coming across something, I involuntarily quickened my pace. I was striding along when there appeared in the heat shimmer something which could only be described as an indistinct blob but which eventually materialised into a large metal-reinforced concrete tank and windmill.

The visual impact of this seemingly-monolithic piece of superstructure, after days of bugger all, was nothing short of overwhelming. I felt as though I had stepped out of the red centre straight into Luna Park.

Closer inspection revealed that the windmill had long since ceased to operate, and that the tank was holed and as dry as a drover's throat. Unfazed, I looked around and spotted a slight rise in the ground, off to one side.

Walking to the top I discovered to my indescribable delight, a beautiful dam, fed by a running spring. On the opposite bank was a flock of thirty or more

Carcory homestead ruins sixty kilometres north of Birdsville.

ducks. I gazed on this idyllic scene for several minutes, utterly bewitched by its unexpected beauty. I could not have been more entranced if there had been a fig tree and a naked Adam and Eve reclining in its shade.

I decided to take an hour off – the decision was not a difficult one. I unpacked in the tank's shade, took my dirty clothes to my new-found Garden of Eden, and did my washing. That done, I stripped off and gave myself a good scrub. I lathered, I sluiced and I wallowed.

I left Yamba Tank refreshed in body and soul, a new man.

Late in the afternoon there appeared another mirage-like shape directly ahead. This one had me guessing because my map showed the area devoid of feature or any 'point of interest'. It wasn't until I came to the top of a slight crest that I realised it was a large truck parked on the side of the road and with a decided lean to port. When I drew closer I saw that the left rear wheel assembly was lying on the ground and that the truck had collapsed on to its axle. I noted that the wheel bearing had generated so much heat it had disintegrated and become welded to the axle. Quite a mess.

To make matters worse there were twenty cattle in the back, all of them in an unhappy frame of mind; I could tell by the bellowing.

I walked along the left side of the truck and was horrified to find a pair of cowboy boots protruding from the passenger window. Not knowing what to expect, I peered into the cab. A body perhaps? Another outback murder?

It was nothing so dramatic. The boots belonged to a stockman who, along with the driver, was catching up on some sleep.

I coughed discreetly. Both men opened their eyes and looked straight at me. It was their turn to double-take.

After we had all recovered, the stockmen explained that the truck's wheel had come off and that they were awaiting the arrival of some blokes to help with the cattle. We were still talking when a utility arrived with another four stockmen with motorbikes.

The trucks' rear gate was opened and the cattle were persuaded to jump to the ground. They were then rounded up by the motorbike riders who began herding them the last five kilometres of their journey. The truck, meanwhile, would have to stay on the side of the road until a mechanic could be brought out to do a bush repair that would enable it to limp back to a station workshop.

It had been an eventful day.

The following morning I came to a billabong which was a far cry from the previous day's waterhole – the water was green, stagnant and choked with algae. I considered boiling it and adding a double dose of water purification tablets but had second thoughts, figuring that I still had plenty and that there was bound to be some more along the road.

A car stopped with an Aboriginal family onboard. A woman in the back leaned through the open window. 'G'day,' she said, 'you alright for toilet paper?'

I was quite taken aback by her genuine and unashamed thoughtfulness. I had been offered many things since leaving Spencer Gulf but this was the first time somebody had offered me toilet paper. I thanked her, saying that I was okay in that department.

' 'Ow about bread?' asked the driver. 'You want some bread?'

I told him I was alright for bread as well but, refusing to take no for an answer, he reached down between his feet, pulled four slices from a paper wrapper and thrust them at me. 'She's right, 'ave these,' he said.

The bread was clean and fresh – if a little misshapen – and, I had to admit, too good to pass up. I sat under a tree and chomped happily on all four slices, washing them down with a mouthful or two of water, thinking that there had to be some calories in there somewhere. Word of my unexpected snack must have spread to the birdlife because no sooner was I seated, before a flock of

hundreds of galahs descended on my tree and set up a screeching that would have raised the dead.

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Friday 6 July was a big day – I walked in T-shirt and thongs for the first time since starting my journey. It put me in good humour, I felt fit, I was mentally attuned to the job in hand and I was raring to go. Speaking out aloud, I said, 'Today will be a thirty-kilometre day.'

After I had been walking for a while I consulted my map which indicated that I had a left turn coming up that would take me the last twenty-five kilometres to Bedourie. The road straight ahead went to Windorah then east to the Queenland coast. I was looking for the turnoff when I came to an abandoned four-wheel-drive bearing the colourful sign: 'WE'LL GET YA GOING.' It proved to be a breakdown vehicle and the sign was a logo. The breakdown magnate had himself broken down and was in the process of organising the rescue of his own vehicle.

I didn't quite make thirty kilometres, I did 29.6 – four hundred metres short. However, it was my second best day and I was well satisfied. I camped at Cookawinchika Waterhole. How's that for a name? The previous night had been at Clergyman Waterhole. It occurred to me not for the first time that I could spend a year wandering around Australia collecting and researching place names.

I set up camp under another explosion of a bird population; there would be no need for an alarm clock in the morning. I had been out for seven nights and tomorrow I would be in Bedourie. I was looking forward to it yet, conversely, I was starting to resent having to stop at towns along the way. I would have been happy to just call in at the general store, re-supply and get on with the walk. I was still enjoying the journey, I knew my body was standing up to the physical demands and I was happy in my own company. I saw no real need to languish in a town, no matter how small, merely to sleep in a bed and eat steak burgers and chips.

On the other hand …

*

Bedourie. To appreciate the remoteness of this little town, consider this: it is 483 kilometres south of Mt Isa, 194 kilometres south of Boulia, 200 kilometres north of Birdsville and, should you contemplate driving into Brisbane, your car will have another 3206 kilometres on the clock by the time you get back. According to the 2006 census, the population of Bedourie is 142 – which makes it a relatively busy place considering the population of the entire Diamantina Shire (of which Bedourie is the administrative centre) is only 326. That is a little on the sparse side given that the shire sprawls across 95,000 square kilometres.

You could fit Denmark into it – twice.

It would be an understatement to say that I was not expecting much in the way of facilities or civic pride, so I was quite dumbfounded when, on entering the town, I found myself walking along a clean street flanked by houses with green lawns. All the buildings I could see were either new or well-restored, and the public facilities included a free public swimming pool, a natural hot spa, an ablution block and squeaky clean barbecues. The Royal Hotel was in need of a lick of paint and a little TLC but I knew that cost money – and the old pub *was* in its 127th year. Even so, it boasted a licensed restaurant and motel-style accommodation.

Bedourie has come a long way since the Divisional Board of Diamantina was formed in 1886. The shire held its first meeting in Bedourie in 1903, and the Diamantina Shire Council Chamber was moved there in 1953, which is one reason why the town has doubled in size since 1990.

All that aside, I found myself captivated by the green oasis with which I was greeted on the afternoon of 7 July. Indeed, I was so busy taking photographs of the unexpected lushness, it took me some time to walk the few blocks to the council building with its library and tourist centre – yes … a tourist centre! There were few people around and even fewer cars, in fact I reckoned I'd seen busier ghost towns.

I met a bloke called Brian at the centre who quizzed me about my walk and my immediate plan. 'I'll call Robbie, he'll want to see you,' he said picking up the phone.

'Robbie?' I said.

'Yes Robbie, the Mayor … hello … Robbie there please?' There was a brief pause, then, 'hello, Rob. Fella just walked in you should meet. Will you be in your office this afternoon? … Fine, I'll send him around. His name's Jeff.'

Brian replaced the receiver. 'Go down the street a few blocks to the roadhouse and ask for Robbie Dare. He'll be expecting you.'

With my municipal obligations thus in hand, I turned to leave the building but was stopped by a tourist who had been waiting behind me, who had obviously been listening in.

'Come over the road to the picnic area and have a cuppa with us and tell us your story,' he said.

I joined a group of about a dozen adults and teenagers gathered around the town's spotlessly clean picnic tables. A slice of fruit cake was pressed on me (there was no argument from me) and I was asked how I liked my coffee. I must have wolfed down the cake because I was asked if I would like some more, and a few minutes later my coffee cup was refilled followed by a third slice of cake.

Then the cameras came out and I was being photographed from every angle.

'Who do I make it out to?' said a voice from behind. It was the bloke who had invited me over. 'The cheque … who do I make it out to?

I saw the figure two hundred dollars on the cheque. I took his pen, wrote 'DeafBlind Association' and thanked him profusely.

What a man! What a town!

I made my way to the business premises of His Worship the Mayor of Bedourie to present my credentials.

The roadhouse-cum-general store-cum-bottle shop-cum-tavern-cum-caravan park was not difficult to locate and, when I introduced myself to one of the staff explaining that I had an appointment with Mayor Dare, I was ushered into a rear office. It was a small room with a table half buried under a clutter of newspapers, invoices, files, packets of paperclips and sundry paraphernalia. On the walls were photographs of race horses, all part-owned by Rob Dare. A busy man, I decided.

The Mayor was on the phone but he was obviously one of those people capable of attending to more than one thing at a time because he signalled me to get out of my pack, take a seat and, holding his hand over the receiver, asked me to start telling my story. I waited until he had finished on the phone before launching into my tale but there were continual interruptions. The phone would ring and he'd raise a hand to hold me in mid-sentence; somebody would poke his head around the door, see me, apologise and promise to come back. Then the phone would ring again. It was like trying to talk to the President of the United States after he had been told Russian missiles had been launched and were on their way to New York. Not surprisingly I did not manage a very coherent account of my travels and I was ready to give up on the idea when he said, 'Where are you staying?'

Grappling with this unexpected change of subject I stammered something about the nice grassed area at the entrance to the town. I was still extolling the virtue of this green sward when he said: 'Hang on a sec,' rose briskly from his chair and disappeared up a passageway.

Very busy man, I thought.

He came back to the office, opened a box on the wall behind him and fished out a motel key on a big wooden tag. 'You'll be in room seven,' he said. 'Stick around for a few days. Take a break.'

I thanked him profusely and made a few more attempts with my story before excusing myself.

My immediate impression of Mayor Dare was that he was a candidate for stomach ulcers, however, I saw him several times over the coming days and

revised my opinion. He was, I decided, one of those people who take everything in their stride, seemingly without stress. Whenever I ran into him he asked me questions about my walk and invariably bought me a Solo at the bar.

And so I stayed the night (and several more) in room seven, on the seventh day of the seventh month of 2007. I knew seven was considered a lucky number but it was the first time I had experienced its mystical powers in such a generous way.

I was expecting a parcel from Bill with some odds and ends, including some light stainless steel wire to make a stronger antenna. (The light copper wire I was using had started to fail, the result of being continually hoisted, pulled down and wound up). I spent Sunday wandering around the town chatting to people and discovering in the process that Bedourie was blessed with only one parcel delivery a week – on Wednesdays. I shrugged off this set-back philosophically, reasoning that an enforced stay in this pleasant little town was something I could handle very easily.

I introduced myself to the ambulance people and spent several mornings drinking coffee on their verandah, swapping yarns and listening to the unhurried sounds of the Bedourie people going about their daily lives. I was offered free internet access at the tourist centre, and Brian, the centre's manager, interviewed me for a story in the shire's next newsletter.

I became a regular customer at the general store where I achieved almost legendary status by purchasing a two-litre tub of ice cream and eating the lot in one sitting on the roadhouse verandah – the staff watched me through the window. When I repeated the performance the next day I felt obliged to explain that I was building up my body fat which had fallen away on my walk. This information was received by the shop staff with such studied interest I felt it would have spoilt the effect by adding that I was also addicted to the stuff, and that I had done it many times before when my body fat was perfectly normal.

I met Jim, the owner of the pub, who had similar interests to my own, and whose mum ran the post office. When I told him of my interest in aviation he said he had a Cessna (VH-UQU) out the back which needed some cobwebs blown off. 'I'll take you for a flight if you like,' he said. 'Haven't been up for a while.'

The Cessna was duly dusted off and we spent an hour soaring over the most wonderful landscape in the world. At least, I reckoned it is.

I decided on Tuesday that I would have to leave the next day whether the parcel arrived or not. It would have been nice to stay longer but my journey beckoned.

I was up and about early. I packed my gear, said my goodbyes at the

roadhouse, had a last coffee at the ambulance depot and went to the pub to see Jim and check on the parcel.

The 'postman' arrived in a four-wheel-drive packed with parcels of all shapes and sizes. His name was Chris, he wore a leather bushy's hat, and he had a hand-rolled cigarette hanging from his bottom lip. We chatted for about half-an-hour while his delivery was sorted. It turned out that Chris was also a cameleer who owned a small herd of camels which he hired out to desert expeditions engaged in film making or archeology. He was quite a character and, by the time he left, I had penciled in a trip with him and his camels into the interior.

My parcel was among the delivery and, after unpacking it and stowing the contents into my pack, I said my final farewells and set off for Boulia, 196 kilometres to the north.

It was a beautiful day and as I strode away and Bedourie slipped slowly below the horizon, I got to thinking how I had come to accept walking nearly two hundred kilometres, which was roughly Sydney to Newcastle, with complete equanimity. I did not even regard it as a challenge. I knew I was physically capable of walking all day, I had enough food and water to maintain me and I had shelter at night. Too easy! I made a mental note not to become blasé. Familiarity, I told myself, breeds contempt, and it would always be a mistake to become over confident in this part of the world.

I slept that night in a gravel pit.

CHAPTER 20

A rude interruption

12 – 26 July, days 99 – 113

(Spot Height – Lat: 23:56.519 Long: 139:32.867)

My next two days were uneventful. I plodded steadily north under the clearest, bluest sky, the kilometres slipping past, the scenery unerringly the same. Warm days, cool evenings, cold mornings – nothing changed, so that I was reminded at every step of the timelessness of my great brown land. An occasional sign post brought my eyes to focus, once in a while a tree proved to me that the barren soil could still sustain life, and raucous bush birds welcomed the mornings and had the last say at night. One morning half a dozen wild horses interrupted their grazing and impassively followed my progress as though such sights were commonplace. 'Stupid bastard,' I thought I heard one say.

Step after step, the rhythm of my walk, the movement of my pack, flicking at the flies, the occasional drink of warm water, a rest in a rare patch of shade, radio schedules, camp fires, starlight, step after step, the rhythm of my walk … there were times when I felt as though there had been an apocryphal event and that I alone had been spared to forever wander the inland. I do not wish to give the impression that I was losing it, I wasn't, it was more a feeling of having been absorbed by a desert that had witnessed the birth of time and which was welcoming me into its womb. I had become a part of it, living off its frugal sustenance, bending to its demands, adjusting everything I did to comply and survive. Deserts, I realized, were like mountains in that one did not conquer them; one learnt how to live according to the dangers and conditions they presented. They set the rules, I obeyed them – or paid the price.

My mind was drifting through such reverie when I came to another roadside grave. It was a simple cross of concrete and steel. The concrete was

breaking away and the steel was rusted. Even concrete and steel have their life spans in these parts. Nevertheless I could read the following letters:

N
LOVING MEM
OF OUR DEAR
OSPEH J.DU
O DIED AU
AGE
10
MTHS
RIP

Dear God! I looked down at yet another lonely grave on another lonely panorama. Ten months!

I tried to imagine what had happened. An accident perhaps? Disease? There would have been no doctor and probably no-one to help. Would the mother's dusty face have been streaked with helpless tears? Had she cursed the land that had taken her baby? Were some quiet words spoken over the grave before the grieving parents walk away? I turned away, heavy of heart.

*

I crossed the Cooramirina Channels which meant that I was now well into the vastness of the Channel Country. Sprawling across 1.3 million square kilometres over an area more than twice the size of Tasmania, this extraordinary territory frequently turns from bone dry to raging flood plains, almost in the blink of an eye. This is a land where heavy rains create rivers running kilometres wide that sweep everything before them in their rush to Lake Eyre. When this happens, everything stops, for there is nothing that can prevail against the might of the Channel Country in full flood.

Unlike rivers in other parts of the world these waterways follow no set path, for the simple reason that no path can contain them. The country is flat and the water wells and swells in great torrents, engulfing everything in its remorseless rush to the lake, covering the whole mind-boggling expanse with lashing deluges that defy imagination. In one recent storm two hundred millimetres of rain fell not far from where I was walking. Two hundred millimetres! In the old money, that's eight inches of rain! On that occasion the soil turned to mud and the dried out water courses became dangerous, surging cataracts. The Georgina River running through Glengyle burst its banks, isolating one family for weeks. Their only way out was in a rescue boat sent from Bedourie,

seventy kilometres away.

Yet the Channel Country may be largely dry for years, with only deep channels remaining filled. That is when the winds raise dust storms that scour the land, turning everything red.

I proceeded with caution. It wasn't about to rain at this time of year, but I found myself glancing up at the cotton wool clouds with more than my usual interest. I'm not sure why – there would have been little point in breaking into a run.

It may or may not have been significant but on 13 July I covered a record thirty-four kilometres.

I was now in another world. The road was mainly bitumen and the flood plain, un-punctuated by shrub or tree, was bone dry and stony. Even named creek beds were waterless, their banks carved and angled like mini Grand Canyons. I could have been on Mars, the red planet.

A hill, a few kilometres off to my right, caught my eye and when I stopped for a break on the morning of Saturday 14 July, I consulted my map to see if it had been ennobled with a name. It had been ennobled all right. This was no hill – *it was a frigging mountain!* Twelve Mile Mountain, to be precise. As I have mentioned before, everything is relative and, while this was no Matterhorn, it did rise to 161 metres – and a 161-metre prominence in this part of the world qualified as a mountain, no doubt about that.

An hour later I reached another milestone, the Tropic of Capricorn. There was no sign advertising the fact but I had my GPS running and when I reached 23deg 36' 35'S I paused to reflect. It was a big moment in my journey – the furthest south where the sun is directly overhead in the Australian summer.

That afternoon I breathed a sigh of relief when I came to a fast-flowing, four metre-wide creek, surging under a concrete bridge. A causeway below the bridge had created a waterhole which was lined with trees full of screeching parrots. It was the perfect place to camp for the night.

I did a full load of washing, hung it out to dry on a tree limb, and was about to start setting up camp when movement caught my eye on the other side of the waterhole. Three brolgas were feeding at the water's edge. They were keeping a wary eye on me but they must have reckoned I posed no threat because they stayed where they were until the sun was about to set, then flew off to their roosting place. Another magical moment on my journey across Australia.

There was plenty of firewood around which was fortunate because I woke to a crisp, two-degree morning. I stoked the fire, tuned in to the WIA broadcast and called Felix who said he was glad to hear from me. It was nice to

hear another voice, though I had not been entirely alone that night. A couple in a campervan had parked a few hundred metres away but as they had made no attempt to say 'G'day', I assumed they wanted to be left alone. Fair enough.

However, several brightly painted vehicles which were on a bash stopped and disgorged drivers and passengers who wanted to read an information board recounting the tale of Eddie 'Jolly' Miller, the last of the outback mailmen whose run covered 250 kilometres from Boulia to Glengyle Station. The trip was supposed to take six hours but occasionally stretched to three or four days if the Georgina channels were in flood. Apparently Eddie always advised his passengers to pack a swag and tucker – just in case they were delayed.

I was about to hit the road when I had an interesting visitor. Jim Browning was travelling in a campervan he had built and fitted out himself – and he had a fund of yarns to share. We had tea and biscuits in the comfort of his van and talked for hours. Jim was a retired trawler builder and boat skipper from Queensland, and it had become his habit to take several months off each year to go bird watching in the outback.

It was lunchtime before I started walking again. I had long been accustomed to finding dead kangaroos and wallabies on the side of the road but on this day I came across the first wild pigs. There were two of them on the verge, their trotters touching – they had apparently been sleeping there when they were cleaned up by a passing vehicle.

I camped that night at a sort of surveyor's benchmark, 23deg 0'00, and noted the event in my diary. I had set up camp when two road building contractors, Matt and Jim, dropped in and said that as they had seen me several times while on their way to work or returning home, they thought it was time they caught up. They lived sixteen kilometres away in Boulia and were maintaining the road shoulders with a grader and water truck. They stayed for an hour listening to me talk to Roger and Bill over the radio, then yarning around the campfire.

They returned next morning when my fire was ablaze, bearing gifts of chocolate, fruit and a tin of baked beans. Matt also offered me his house in Boulia, a gesture which was appreciated even more than the tucker they had brought. I had planned only an overnight there, but now I could tarry a little longer.

I was within two kilometres of Boulia when I came to a T-junction. I knew it was coming up and, more importantly, that a decision would be called for: I had planned to turn right to Karumba via Julia Creek (for no other reason than that my firstborn was called Julia), but if I turned left I would go through Mt Isa and Cloncurry, two substantial towns where I would be able to promote

DeafBlind – which, after all, was the major reason for my walk.

I turned left.

Boulia, if you will forgive the Irish, was pretty big for a small town. It had even enjoyed its moments in the spotlight by winning the Tidy Town award in 1997 and runner-up in 1996 and 1998.

I found Matt's place and knocked on the back door. His wife Sally greeted me cordially, saying, 'Matt will be home around 5.30, why don't you leave your pack and have a look around town?' I had already done that but I was more than happy to unburden myself and do it again.

We had a magnificent home-cooked dinner that night. It transpired during the course of the meal that upwards of four thousand people were expected in town over the coming weekend for a rodeo and camel racing. My mind flicked automatically to tin-rattling possibilities. The problem was that today was only Tuesday, the big weekend was five days away. It wasn't a big problem, in fact I had it licked before dinner was over. I would stay.

I discovered that Boulia is a fascinating place; the name is believed to have meant waterhole in the local Aboriginal dialect. Burke and Wills were the first Europeans to pass through the area and it was Wills who gave his name to the Wills River, fourteen kilometres away. However, Boulia's claim to fame rests with its association with the now famous Min Min Lights.

The story goes that the lights made their first appearance soon after the old Min Min Hotel burnt down in 1918. A stockman was riding past the Min Min graveyard on his way to Boulia, seventy-three kilometres away, when he saw a strange glow in the middle of the cemetery. He reckons (and as everybody knows, stockmen don't tell lies) he reckons that he watched the light grow bigger and bigger until it was the size of a watermelon. 'It began moving towards me and I broke into a cold sweat,' he later attested. 'It was too much for my nerves.' He said he dug his spurs into his horse's flanks and high-tailed it into Boulia, followed by the light. Only when he reached Boulia did it disappear. There have, of course, been several sightings since then, and the local council has helped things along a little with a 'Min Min Encounter' complex, which I reckon is fair enough – if Loch Ness can have a monster, Boulia is certainly entitled to a mysterious light or two.

There were other attractions as well. The town, which has a population of three hundred when everybody is at home, has a terrific sports centre, swimming pool, basketball courts, gymnasium, café and sports oval. Like Bedourie, it can be on the quiet side; I walked through the town's sports complex one day and the only two signs of life were a schoolgirl hitting up on a squash court by herself, and a flock of hundreds of cockatoos on the footy oval.

But there were two health assessment professionals in Boulia who had all the computer programs and equipment necessary to assess a person's level of physical fitness. I offered myself for testing to check that my high level of exercise and meager diet were doing me no harm. Chris, the senior staffer, assured me after exhaustive tests that I had the metabolism of a thirty-eight-year old. Struggling to contain my euphoria I immediately phoned Bill and Roger with the news which they posted to our web page.

The week passed quickly. I introduced myself to Bob from the general store and hardware who gave me permission to scratch around his 'junk' storage area at the back of the shop. I was hoping to rebuild that attenna. I was still carrying the stainless steel wire but I needed sundry bits and pieces, and I was sure I would find them behind Bob's shop. I unearthed some Perspex and bought a few odds and ends and, using Matt's tools, set to work to build the ultimate, indestructible radio antenna. My finished product looked good and I was certain it would withstand the rigours of travel and constant dismantling. The only problem with it was that it didn't work. It took me all day and several telephone calls to accept that I was wasting my time and, in the end, I used some heavier but flexible copper wire which worked a treat, and lasted well past the end of my journey.

On Friday 20 July sleepy little Boulia was transformed by the arrival of thousands of visitors. It was as though they had risen from the floodplains. The formerly empty racetrack, five kilometres out of town, was now packed with caravans, tents and campervans of every shape and size. There were food stalls, portable dunnies, cowboys jostling with tourists, old folk, young folk, a PA system, a bar …

I was met by Andrew Saunders, the race day announcer, who said he wanted to introduce me to the crowd the following day. 'I want you to walk into the arena in full uniform,' he said. 'Back pack, solar panel, everything.' He was like a film director organising a big scene for a blockbuster movie. And he didn't stop there – Andrew was the breakfast announcer for ABC Mt Isa, and he wanted to record an interview to put to air the following week.

Next morning I arose early and kitted up, determined to walk the five kilometres to the racetrack. Plenty of people had offered me a lift but I thought it would look better if I walked. Besides, it would have been a struggle fitting all my gear into a car.

I arrived in good time and treated myself to a hamburger, chips and a couple of hot dogs. I must have stood out like the proverbials because I noticed a number of people standing back, watching and wondering who I was and what the hell I was doing.

I was polishing off the last of the chips when I was approached by a bloke who looked vaguely familiar. 'You look like you have a story to tell,' he said.

We chatted about my walk but it was only when he introduced himself that I realised I was talking to Monte Dwyer, the TV weatherman.

'Now hang on a tick,' he said. 'Mt Isa 4LM FM radio are here doing a live broadcast. They'll want to interview you live on air. Don't move.'

Obediently, I stayed put.

I was wondering what he was up to when his voice was again in my ear. 'Grab your pack and follow me.' He was already disappearing into the crowd but I snatched up my pack and lurched after him, weaving through the mob, my pack swaying perilously. We stopped on a grassed section where a desk had been set up with 4LM banners and some technical equipment, all under the supervision of a pretty young woman who smiled up at me.

Monte introduced us: 'Jeff … Jodie. Jodie … Jeff.' Then he disappeared again.

Jodie pulled a chair over and explained that she would like to interview me when the studio next crossed to her. She also wanted to keep in touch during my two-week walk to Mt Isa, and do another interview when I arrived.

I thanked my lucky stars that I had taken that left turn into Boulia. The

The Mt. Isa Visitors' Centre was the best I had encountered.

way this was going, there soon wouldn't be a house in central Queensland that hadn't heard of DeafBlind. I was on a roll!

Despite the number of interviews under my belt, I was as nervous as a chicken on a chopping block. I think it was because I was face-to-face with this bubbly young presenter instead of being on my Pat Malone under a gum tree. However, Jodie was terrific; she guided me through, and we continued talking about the walk and DeafBlind well after we had gone off air.

Monte must have been keeping an eye on me because as soon as I left Jodie he was back at my elbow, guiding me towards his brightly muralled van. 'Come and have a coffee and a yarn,' he said.

The luxurious van belonged to radio and television presenter Charles Wooley who had asked Monte to collect some bush stories for Monte's upcoming book 'Red in the Centre'. He was interested in the camel races and the Min Min light saga.

Monte had been interviewing me about an hour when the race announcer declared his intention to introduce me to the crowd after the next camel race.

It was done with little formality. The announcer dragged me over to a fence separating the camels, called for attention and, after testing his microphone, said: 'You might have seen this bloke at the food stalls stuffing his face with chips. Well, he's walking across Australia from Port Augusta to Karumba, 2500 kilometres, to raise money for the DeafBlind Association. Now, he'll be walking through the crowd this afternoon rattling his tin, and I would like you all to dig deep and reward him for his efforts.'

I collected $400 that afternoon.

The next day was fairly quiet with most people preparing to return to their homes, often hundreds of kilometres away. I concentrated on organising a new camera to replace the one I had been carrying. Its shutter button had been playing up and it had finally given up the ghost on my last day at Boulia. I contacted Bill who said he would send a replacement to Martin Kelly, the ambulance man at Mt. Isa.

*

Next morning, Monday 23 July, Tiny came over as I was packing up and gave me a going away present of chocolate, fruit and a five dollar note. 'For the cause,' he said. I was touched. Tiny was a friend of Matt and Sally, and we had gravitated towards each other during my short stay. I knew he was doing it tough, so five dollars was a generous donation. We both stood there in the early morning sun like a couple of idiots, not knowing what else to say and finding it difficult to say goodbye.

I did the rounds of the other locals, finishing at the store where Bob counted out the donations and changed it for notes, ready for depositing to DeafBlind. Matt and Sally said they would be driving to Mt Isa on Thursday to take Tiny to the airport, and that they would drop off some water and more goodies. As I headed out of town I looked back at the 'Welcome to Boulia' sign and saw at the bottom the message: 'Home of Grant Wells, Champion Cowboy'. Grant Wells, I remembered was Sally's grandson.

*

The first tourists to stop were Brian and Carol from Belmont, a Newcastle suburb. It was a fortuitous meeting because Brian is an amateur radio operator (VK2EBC) and a member of Westlakes Radio Club – as are Bill and I.

I camped opposite the road into Stockport Station, twenty-three kilometres from Boulia. Stockport is another big station: a thousand square kilometres running some cattle and two thousand sheep. I was enjoying an after-dinner coffee when Sam dropped in from the station. We discussed the property's wind generator, which I could see from my campsite. 'She's a 2000 watt unit on a hundred foot tower,' said Sam.

I said I was impressed.

'Doesn't produce much power when there's no wind,' he said.

I looked across at the tower and its motionless blades. True.

I awoke to a warm morning but the wind was blowing like the very devil, bending the sparse vegetation and sending dust clouds scudding across the land – and turning the windmill with gusto.

I found that if I held my solar panel at the right angle it acted like a sail and dragged me forward. I played with that for a while, imagining myself being blown effortlessly along the bitumen, my feet barely touching the ground. One of the problems was that the noise of the wind drowned out the sound of approaching vehicles so that they were within a hundred metres before I could get off the road. This was awkward because the bitumen was only single lane and if the vehicle had to leave it for the shoulder, I was enveloped with dust.

Two more tourists pulled over, Denis and Jackie. 'Can you stop for a cuppa?' yelled Denis.

'Sure can.'

'It'll be ready for you up the road.'

They drove a kilometre or so, pulled over, and had the kettle on the boil when I caught up. We were sipping a hot cup of tea when their friends arrived in a second vehicle. Another cup of tea, another biscuit … I was starting to feel better.

At that night's radio sched I told Bill and Roger I would be packing up my

radio after we signed off and that I would email by sat phone in the morning. This, I said, would enable me to be away by 7.30a.m.

*

Alderley Station was to be a stop-over as I was told it was 'right by the road'. It wasn't but I decided against going in as I had enough water for the day and there was a roadside stop fifteen kilometres ahead with a toilet and water supply.

The country, meanwhile, was slowly changing from mostly flat to gently undulating. I reached the roadside stop with its brick building and flushing toilet about midday. Gratefully, I dumped my pack and entered the washroom where I paused to admire the plumbing. Not that there was anything wonderful about it but it was … well, it was plumbing.

When I emerged I found a Shell road train parked outside. The driver, a bloke called Ian, called me over, pulled an esky out of his cab and started making me a cold meat and chutney sandwich.

'How many would you like?' he asked.

I tried to tell him that just one would be fine but he wouldn't hear of it. He said he'd read about me in a Mt Isa Newspaper and that if the story was anywhere near right I needed more than one sandwich. So I finished the first one and had chomped into the second when he started buttering a third.

'No more,' I said through a mouthful of bread, meat and chutney.

'Pineapple juice,' he said. 'That's what you need.'

Another dive into the esky produced a bottle of pineapple juice which he opened with a flourish. He stayed until I'd finished all three sandwiches and drained the bottle of juice, then jumped into his cab and, with a cheery wave, yelled 'Good luck, Mate,' and drove away. I stood in the middle of the road, burping chutney and pineapple juice, watching his third trailer disappear around a bend, thinking, what a generous bloke.

'Hello again.'

I swung around, startled. I recognised her immediately from the Boulia camel races. Jenny had made herself known to me, addressing me as David. I'd put her right and we had got into conversation. Now it was my turn to be embarrassed; I'd been so busy scoffing sandwiches I had failed to notice the car and caravan pull over.

'You made me jump,' I said. 'I didn't hear you over the tanker.'

Jenny introduced me to her husband and suggested a coffee in their caravan. Figuring there was still room for a coffee I followed them over, dropped the pack and settled myself into their well-appointed caravan. It was there that they told me their story.

It seems that Jenny had lived on a boat with her first husband and that he had suffered a fatal heart attack while they were sailing off Cardwell in Queensland. She was not an experienced sailor but had managed to get the boat back to port with a little help over the radio. Her second husband, the bloke she was now with, lost his wife when she collapsed on their caravan-renovations factory floor. Now Jenny and her new husband were touring the outback in a beautifully-finished caravan.

I walked twenty-eight kilometres that day before setting up camp at Dingo Creek where I built up a generous campfire. I figured that my sanctuary for the night had not been given that name for nothing, and that after my previous experience it would be wise to err on the side of caution.

Next morning I was on the road half-an-hour before sunrise. It had been a deliberate decision aimed at conserving my energy. I felt I had been 'stepping out' too fast and that it would be better if I walked a little longer but slower. I have always been a stroller rather than a fast walker, and I reckoned I would benefit from a more sedate pace.

Matt and Sally came by with Tiny on their way to Mt Isa Airport. They dropped off two litres of water and a family-size bar of chocolate which I ate more or less straight away. I had to – it would have melted.

Five hours later they stopped again, this time on their way home. They handed over a feast of Kentucky fried chicken and a can of Solo to wash it down. Calorie-wise, it had been a good day.

My camp that night was at Bradleys Creek and when I raised Roger on the radio sched I knew immediately that something was wrong.

Is everything okay? he asked.

Sure, I had a good day today. Thirty kilometres. Why?

Bill didn't get your noon position today. He called me around 2pm and after a lot of discussion, he phoned Boulia police. They were aware of your walk and Bill explained that it could be a communications glitch. He told them he was concerned.

Bugger!

We had arranged that if this sort of thing happened we would wait until the next schedule call time before raising the alarm. However, Bill was understandably worried and had felt it prudent to at least notify the police.

Sgt Rowan Williams at Boulia had apparently shared his concern because he had phoned any locals he knew who had used the road. When that drew a blank he did the rounds of the caravan park. He was still trying to track me down when he had received a message about 5.30pm that I had been in touch.

It was an unfortunate incident. I had made a note of my GPS position

in my diary about noon and, as far as I remembered, I had keyed it into the sat phone's email function. However, because the phone has no 'sent' folder I was unable to confirm that it had been transmitted. Perhaps I had been distracted and had failed to send; maybe my message was somewhere in the ether. I would never know.

As a result, we changed our procedure. Bill would now send return emails to me confirming he had received my morning and noon reports and, if I received no reply within fifteen minutes, I would call him on the sat phone. I felt much happier with this new arrangement because we had been determined from the outset not to alert emergency people unless absolutely necessary.

I thought that might have been the end of it but alas, once a story is in circulation in the outback it can be difficult to kill.

It was the next day and I had stopped for a break at a tributary of Carbine Creek where there were some good-size trees. I needed a toilet break and the trees fifty metres up the pebble-strewn creek seemed to offer as good a place as any.

Leaving my pack by the causeway, I headed off and was squatting comfortably behind a substantial tree allowing nature to take its course, when a north-bound car and caravan cruised slowly over the causeway. I ducked instinctively, making sure I remained out of sight until it reached the other side of the creek.

I was still sighing with relief when it turned and headed back more slowly. I thought, oh shit, they've decided to stop and boil the billy.

The driver and passenger were peering intently in my direction, forcing me to move around my tree to remain out of sight. It struck me that this was surely the most undignified situation in which a man could find himself.

The car crossed the bridge, did another U-turn and came back over the causeway, this time stopping in the middle. The driver climbed out and, shielding his eyes with his hands, began a systematic search of the bush in my immediate vicinity.

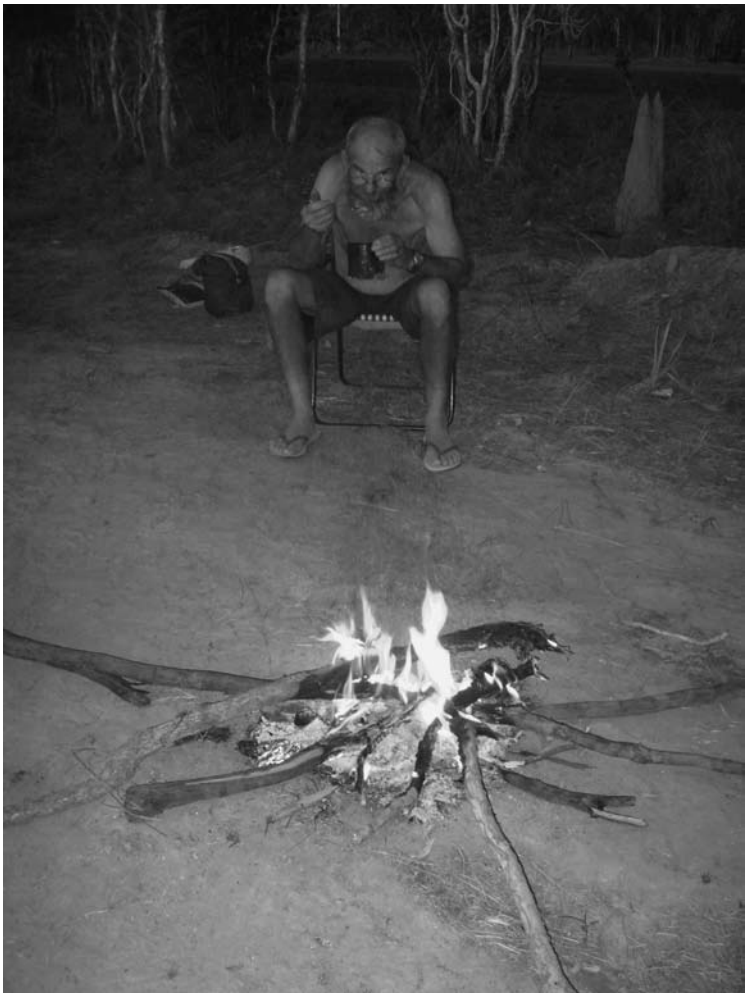
As I had by this time completed my business, I sheepishly emerged from behind the tree and walked back to the causeway where the now-embarrassed driver explained his curiosity.

'We were in Boulia yesterday and heard about you being lost out here somewhere,' he said. 'We saw your pack alongside the road and feared the worst. Thought we had to investigate,' he added lamely.

We shared a cup of tea and a laugh, but I knew that this was one story that would be doing the rounds of the caravan parks for a while to come.

Later that day I was almost within earshot of Dajarra when a male jogger

in shorts and singlet, appeared from the direction of the small town. He was the local policeman, he said, and it was his practice to take an afternoon jog to and around the local airstrip. 'I'm in training for the footy season,' he said then he ran off towards the airstrip, his feet slapping hard on the bitumen.



Relaxing after a long day on the track.

CHAPTER 21

The pig hunters

27 July – 18 August, days 114 – 136

(Dajarra – Lat: 21:41.710 Long: 139:30.907)

If I had been surprised by the appearance of the policeman jogger I was even more taken aback on entering Dajarra's roadhouse. It was the first place I had seen on entering the town but I was more interested in a grassed area a little beyond it where there was a public toilet. I walked back to the roadhouse, slipped off my pack and walked inside to ask if I could set up camp on the nice grass.

'Where's yer pack?' asked the bloke behind the counter. Then, before I could answer, he called out to the back of the shop, '*Burger with the lot and double chips!*'

I was still standing dumbfounded wondering if he was a bit loopy when he said again, 'Where's yer pack?'

I pointed to where I had left it on the other side of the bowsers, intending to explain that I usually left it outside on account of its bulkiness, but he again got in first. 'Well go and get it and come back in.'

Deciding it was better to do as I was told, I retrieved the pack and re-entered the roadhouse, hoping that all would become clear. I was hardly through the door before he had me by the arm and was leading me out through the back of the shop to an outdoor area with a table and chairs. Indicating two of the chairs he said, 'Now, park yer arse on that one and yer pack on that one.'

I still hadn't spoken but I did as he suggested and was making myself comfortable when a second bloke walked over. 'I'm Adrian and this is Barry, but we call him Doc,' said my host. Then he called out to a lady Asian cook, 'How's that burger coming?'

Not waiting for a reply he disappeared back into the shop and returned

with a newspaper in which there was a story about my walk. 'Saw this and been waiting for you,' he explained. 'They said you like to get stuck into the burgers and chips when you can.' Adrian laughed in appreciation of his own adroitness.

A plate appeared in front of me piled high with one of the biggest burgers I'd seen, surrounded by salad and a small mountain of chips.

'Take it slow,' said Adrian. 'When you're finished I'll show you to your room. What would you like to drink?'

'Do you have Solo?' I asked.

'Solo coming up,' said Adrian.

After I had polished off the burger I was shown to room ten. I had no sooner unpacked when Barry came for my washing. 'Leave this to me,' he said.

With nothing else to do I returned to the table and chairs where I met Vaughan, the town's senior policeman, who invited me to his place for a chat round what he described as his famous backyard fire. I had already accepted an invitation to have dinner with Adrian and Barry and watch some footy, but I managed to duck over to Vaughan's at half time to sample the promised fireside spectacular.

The backyard was fairly small, the fire was enormous and the hospitality was as warm as the embers. I met Vaughan's wife Deslie, his mother Sarah plus a number of children and dogs.

And that was my introduction to Dajarra.

*

Needless to say, I slept in next morning – I enjoy camping but I also enjoy a comfortable bed between times. I decided to take a walk around the town and was again surprised by the size of it: a large police station, nursing clinic, general store and a museum of sorts. The population was about two hundred, mostly Aboriginal.

I discovered on the Mt Isa business web site that the town's older people remember when Dajarra was trucking more cattle than Texas.

I pottered around all morning so that it was 1pm before I hoisted my pack and resumed my journey.

Several hours later a Mt Isa school teacher called Brenda, who I had met around Vaughan's campfire, stopped on her way back to Isa and said she would ask her school if they would like me to give a talk to their students. She would also contact the local scouts and guides. 'Maybe they'd like to walk the last five kilometres into town with you,' she said.

'No problems,' I said, thinking it was all grist for the mill!

Next morning two blokes on trail bikes came down the road with a thousand head of cattle. They said they were spreading them out over several

waterholes. The cattle passed in a cloud of dust which seemed to hang in the air long after they had gone. They were a spectacular sight in the otherwise empty landscape.

The road had been heading almost due west for thirty kilometres but it now turned north-west.

A dust-streaked tray-back ute with spotlights and caged dogs appeared out of nowhere. It was a typical pig shooters rig – nothing fancy, just mean, lean and deadly. It looked like something out of Mad Max. The driver stopped and he and his mate topped up my water supply before heading off towards the interior.

They came back next morning and asked if I was okay. It had obviously been a good night because there were now several wild pigs in the back and the dogs were panting with excitement. I had assumed that the pigs were dead so I was surprised to see one move, obviously very much alive.

'They're all alive, mate,' said the passenger in answer to my query. 'The dogs bail 'em up and we catch 'em and take 'em to the processors.'

He made it sound so simple ... and he was so dismissive. I tried to imagine the scene. A wild pig with razor-sharp tusks, bailed up by snarling dogs, and these blokes step in, grab it, lift it on to the back of the ute and drive it into town to the meat processors. I decided that as a career, wild pig hunting was right at the bottom of my preference list. They drove off towards Mt Isa with their odious load, leaving me to follow at my leisurely pace.

The big mining town was now only a hundred kilometres away and I reckoned I could almost smell it. I was looking forward to getting there because Isa would be my launching pad for my last northern push to Karumba. It was certainly getting warmer. The temperature was now reaching thirty degrees, forcing me to slow down to minimise sweating. I am well aware that sweating does more than just dehydrate, it causes your body to lose vital elements such as electrolytes. These can be replaced with special drinks but as I did not have access to them it was important to control my body heat.

The postman stopped to say G'day. His name was Steve and he was delivering mail from Mt Isa to Boulia, Urandangi and various stations.

'How far would that run be?' I asked.

'Eight hundred kilometres,' said Steve. 'Mind you, it takes me all day."

At 10am Vaughan's wife Deslie arrived as arranged to top up my water supply from a twenty-litre container in the back of the ute. She also brought a food parcel of apples, fruit cake, a sandwich and a chocolate bar. I was starting to worry about my claim to be walking across Australia unsupported, when in truth I was being re-supplied almost on a daily basis. I was still pondering this

when Adrian, the generous but bossy roadhouse operator from Dajarra, turned up with a sandwich and a soft drink. As it was almost midday I found a shady tree, ate and drank my fill and sent my noon email to Bill. His incoming message informed me that my nephew Danny had arranged accommodation for me at Mt Isa.

Bill had also arranged for me to phone Steve Austin of ABC 612 Brisbane at 7.15pm on 31 July, and to visit the studio in Mt Isa for a live interview. I was looking forward to this because I had been a regular listener of Steve's when I was living in my caravan on Allan Creek.

On 31 July I camped near Moonah Creek, only forty-five kilometres from Mt Isa. I was aware now of growing excitement; I was getting close to achieving my aim of walking across Australia and I knew that nothing would stop me now.

Next day, I was cleaning up camp at Sybella Creek in readiness for hitting the track when a clean four-wheel-drive pulled in bearing Martin Kelly, the ambulance man. He was delivering my new camera which Bill had posted. He headed straight back to town after giving me directions on how to find his office. The camera was a beauty – seven megapixels compared with my old one with only two.

*

By 8am on 2 August I could see the smoking chimneys of Mt. Isa shimmering in the morning heat. They appeared as I crested each hill and disappeared when I reached the bottom. It was a pleasant experience because the road was now winding through and around the countryside instead of disappearing into a distant pinpoint.

I was met by a photographer from the North West Star who took some shots hanging from the back of the ute and holding the camera low on the ground, while his driver moved slowly forward.

I came to a nice park where I was to meet the scouts and guides who would accompany me into town – but nobody turned up. They had apparently been unable to get anything organised on a school day which was understandable. Next, I dropped in at the ambulance station only to discover that Martin Kelly was out of town. Undeterred, I crossed the Leichardt River into the town proper and found Artisan Block and Sleeper where my accommodation had been arranged. There was no disappointment there – Penny-Michelle gave me a splendid room in the main house.

*

I awoke next morning feeling refreshed and ready to tackle anything that was thrown at me. I headed off early for the 4LM studio and the radio interview

with Jodie. As I was expected at 7am I left my lodgings at 5.45 – I have a thing about punctuality.

Jodie handles the breakfast session on her own so I knew I would have to wait for a break in the program before she could answer my ring on the station's door buzzer. She arrived a few minutes later full of apologies and bubbling with enthusiasm.

She led the way into the studio where I noticed she had arranged personal knick-knacks and, curiously, a bowl containing a Siamese fighting fish called Flem (as in 4LM).

The interview went well. It was unhurried, I felt confident for a change, and Jodie seemed genuinely interested in DeafBlind and the reason for my walk. When it was over she invited me to an outside broadcast the following day at which there would be a sausage sizzle.

With time on my hands I walked a few blocks to a converted house, now the studio and offices of another FM radio station, 4MOV. I knocked quietly on the front door and, when there was no answer, I padded round the back where a half open door led into a kitchen. I was standing outside, unsure what to do next when a young Aboriginal woman saw me and invited me inside. Her name was Lea.

Trish was called for – I had spoken to her over the phone – then Barry appeared. It was by now apparent that 4MOV was an indigenous station which pleased me no end because I have an affinity with Aboriginal people. (I once had a music shop in Broome and it was partly through that that I developed strong ties with local Aboriginals, and a deep respect for their culture).

Barry, who was obviously interested in my walk, ushered me into the studio, called for coffee, placed both feet on his desk and began an on-air interview punctuated with such songs as 'These shoes are made for walking' and 'I would walk five hundred miles'. It was all very relaxed and totally enjoyable.

Next, I trekked across to the Happy Valley State School for my talk to the children but was again disappointed. The teacher I was to meet was off sick and her kids had been dispersed to other classes.

Down but undaunted, I called in at the Mt Isa Outback Centre for a pre-arranged meeting with the manager. A barbecue had been planned and Brian, the manager, had said he would present me and call for donations. It was a wonderful information centre, one of the best I had seen, but Brian was not there. I caught up with him a couple of days later and he apologised profusely, explaining that a new rodeo complex was to open the following weekend, and he had been running himself ragged arranging it.

The following day, Saturday 4 August, was more successful with more

radio interviews with Jodie at the sausage sizzle, but I had by this time developed a somewhat negative feel for Mt Isa. There had been too many disappointments.

My bad run continued next morning.

There is a ten thousand-step walking trail around Mt Isa covering a distance of a little over four kilometres, and I had offered to walk it eight times, thus exceeding my daily record since leaving Port Augusta. The idea was that people would test themselves by walking with me. There had been some enthusiasm for the idea which I saw as a golden opportunity to raise more funds. I accordingly presented myself at the starting point, fully booted and spurred and wearing my full pack. However the previous day's enthusiasm had apparently dissolved overnight because only one man turned up. After completing one lap we decided to abandon the idea.

*

I left the big mining town the following Monday; it was the easiest farewell I'd made since the start of the walk. I had left a collection tin at the Irish Club – perhaps my faith in Mt Isa would be restored there.

Walking became tough; there was a strong headwind and the hills were steep enough to slow me down. The pack seemed heavier as well, though I knew it wasn't. That was what a few slack days had done for me. I'd lost my edge. At 4pm I called it a day. I had covered only ten kilometres but I was tired and, perhaps for the first time, a little dispirited. I walked thirty metres off the side of the road, found a relatively level spot and pitched my tent between rocks and tufts of spinifex.

Next day the terrain flattened out for a short while and I found myself in a world of anthills. They were everywhere. Then the undulating hills started again. If you are in a car you don't notice them, but its surprising how much more energy is expended when you are on foot with a pack on your back.

I breasted one hill where there was a widened section for overtaking and, seeing a guidepost, eased my pack off and slumped on the ground, leaning against the post. I had my back to the wind, and I was watching the almost continuous stream of west-bound traffic when a brightly coloured van flashed past. I recognised it immediately; it was Monte Dwyer in Charles Wooley's distinctive camper. I jumped to my feet and waved rather forlornly, thinking he had not seen me. But to my delight, his stop lights blinked, he pulled in to a widened section, did a three-point turn, and headed slowly back.

I was gripped by a feeling bordering on elation as he climbed out of the vehicle and advanced with outstretched hand. It was as though I had been living the life of Robinson Crusoe and had stumbled across an old friend.

I think Monte must have sensed a slide in my morale because he led me round the back of the camper, opened the door and said, 'Lets have a cuppa, mate.'

We had several cuppas and knocked off a packet of biscuits as well. We chatted about everything: the stories he was gathering for Charles Wooley, my own adventures since Boulia, the weather, football – you name it. He gave me a signed copy of 'Slapped by an Angel', a book he had co-written with Kym Crosbie, and he recorded some more of my adventures for 'Red in the Centre'.

We parted with another handshake, a pat on the back and, as he drove away, a final wave. I felt better, much better. I was ready to roll again.

I came a little later to Inta Bridge where it crosses the east branch of the Leichhardt River. It was an awesome sight, even in the dry. Its twisted, tortured banks were evidence of the floods that scoured its course; the debris was piled like barricades, waiting for the next onslaught to carry it towards Lake Julius. There is a massive underground pipeline from the lake to the Ernest Henry Copper Mine, a hundred kilometres away.

I camped at Charley Creek after walking twenty-nine kilometres; not bad considering.

*

I awoke to the hum of traffic; there are hundreds of vehicles a day on this main link between the eastern states and Darwin. I felt somehow rejuvenated and, forgetting my earlier decision to slow my pace, I began walking at a pretty fast lick. The road was hilly and twisty and, being busy, few people stopped. It didn't matter, I had the bit between my teeth, I was eating the kilometres.

I passed the turnoff to Mary Kathleen, the uranium ghost town which closed in 1984, thirty years after the discovery. I would like to have paid a visit but it was five kilometres in and I wanted to keep moving.

However, I did stop at the Fountain Springs rest area, half way between Mt Isa and Cloncurry, where there were clean toilets, fresh water and plenty of sheltered tables. I stayed two hours, cleaning up, eating lunch and regaining strength for the afternoon walk.

I pushed on to Corella River which had been highly recommended as an overnight campsite. I was not disappointed. There was a high bridge over running water and plenty of shade and firewood. Burke and Wills passed through here on their journey north, a plaque marks where they camped. I imagined their delight at finding such a beautiful place. Even better for my purposes was the bridge which, in tandem with a high tree branch, provided first class anchor points for my antenna. Radio reception that night was the best ever.

Dinner wasn't bad either. I shared the spot with a couple in a four-wheel-

drive camper who turned on sausages, potatoes and buttered bread. And that, after a hard day's walking, is five star tucker. Pete and Chris were from Broome where Pete was a prison officer.

I was feeling mightily pleased with myself. I had a full belly, a fire, good company – and I had covered a record thirty-six kilometres.

Next morning I heard Jodie's radio breakfast session on my neighbour's radio so I phoned in on impulse for one last interview.

*

Cloncurry was three kilometres off my route but I wanted to pay a visit, mainly because it is one of those iconic places everybody has heard of and probably few people get to see.

I had a telephone call from Tom Harwood of Queensland Regional ABC Radio, and arranged an interview for 9am on Monday. I was walking towards the caravan park at the eastern end of town when I received a 'Hoy' from two women working in a commercial laundry. I wandered across and they said they had heard about my walk and wanted to take up a collection for the cause.

I checked in at the caravan park and spent most of the next day haunting the bakery (justifiably famous for its pies, sausages and sandwiches), Woolworths (they promised to put a collection tin near the check-out), and the post office.

I discovered that Cloncurry is a thoroughly modern town with an Olympic pool and many fine buildings. And I was fascinated by the fact that the town holds the record for the highest temperature recorded in Australia, 53.9 degrees or 127.5 F in 1899. What better place for a solar thermal power station? The Queensland Government had already announced plans for precisely that: by 2010 no fewer than eight thousand mirrors will be reflecting sunlight on to graphite blocks, generating steam to operate a turbine generator. Cloncurry will thus become the first town in Australia to be powered entirely by thermal power. I was impressed.

On Sunday 12 August I turned my back on the outback town and headed towards the turnoff and the road to Normanton and Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria. Once again, I had a spring in my stride.

Next day I was interviewed by Leonie from the ABC's far west radio base in Longreach, who said she would keep her listeners informed on my progress. She said she would lift the information from my web page.

The publicity was by now working well – one heavily tattooed bloke in a ute with a dog in the back, made a U-turn and handed me a bottle of Powerade. He said he had heard about me in the Mt Isa newspaper and reckoned I'd be in need of a pick-me-up. He was dead right, it was starting to get quite hot.

I noticed that I had developed a slight limp. I thought at first my pack was

Quamby Hotel. Note the elegant entrance across the back of a derelict ute.

unbalanced until I realised that the heat from the bitumen was penetrating my boot soles causing tenderness to the balls of my feet. My right foot was the worst affected. It was particularly noticeable after a break, when I found myself walking quite gingerly for a few minutes. I was wearing two pairs of socks to compensate for my boot linings becoming more compressed, and I was changing the socks every day. It was a worry but there wasn't much more I could do about it.

I arrived at the Quamby pub about 3pm and headed straight for the bar and a Solo. I asked the somewhat disinterested barmaid if there was anything to eat and she pointed languidly at some Smiths Chips. I settled for a packet of nuts and said I would wait until 6.30 for dinner.

Richard, the owner, arrived soon afterwards and found me a stretch of grass near the swimming pool for my tent. I was surprised there was a pool

because Quamby, once a regular Cobb and Co. stopping place, now boasted only a pub. Richard had bought it a few years ago in a dilapidated condition, and had set about restoring it to something like its former glory. One has to admire people with such drive and enthusiasm.

*

I was now a hop, step and jump from Burke and Wills Roadhouse, my penultimate launching pad for Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria. Normanton would be my last such base but I knew that when I made the roadhouse there would be no holding me.

I left Quamby's one-pub 'town' after a good breakfast with Richard and his mum, and I had been on the road less than an hour when some grey nomads pulled over with my much-loved, well-travelled billy. I had left it on the pub verandah. I thanked them profusely – I was emotionally attached to the wretched thing, it would have been like losing an old friend.

A couple of days later, on 16 August, I was looking for a camping spot when a cyclist approached from the north, with saddlebags hanging everywhere. Ron said he was also looking for an overnight camp and we agreed to team up for the night. Ron was a self-confessed city slicker, a government worker who had taken extended leave to cycle around Australia. He had started in Adelaide, ridden to Townsville and Normanton and was on his way to Cloncurry, with four thousand kilometres behind him. He had been staying in caravan parks and I think this was the first time he had camped out.

'First, we'll get a fire going,' I said.

Ron was nervous about that. 'Are we allowed to?' he asked.

I explained all about fire safety and told him to walk into the bush for one minute in a straight line, and bring back all the firewood he found. He returned with an armful – then went back for more.

We ate our separate dinners sitting round the fire, chatting about anything and everything.

Next morning dawned warm, humid and drizzling rain. We got out our wet weather gear and re-stoked the fire with reasonably dry wood from under a large tree.

When the rain increased we decided to take the day off. 'Taking the day off' in these circumstances involves lying in the tent reading, or perhaps making notes on the journey, with occasional dashes to the fire to keep it going.

We still received visitors. The manager of Gleeson Station dropped in to ask if we needed anything and later in the day, a mud-splattered four-wheel-drive arrived bearing Ian from Burleigh Heads on the Gold Coast. Ian is a pig hunter extraordinaire in that he had neither rifle nor dogs. He wasn't even

wearing boots. Ian hunts pigs with a crossbow, wearing soft-soled shoes which looked to me like carpet slippers. He told us that he had written to thirty station properties for permission to hunt but only one had given him the go-ahead. To make matters worse, he had driven four days to get here, only to find that the rain had caused the pigs to scatter in all directions. They would normally have been around waterholes, now they were happily wallowing in mud kilometres away. Ian's little safari had turned into an expensive eight-day drive for nothing. He was one unhappy pig hunter.

Ron and I went our separate ways the following day. The rain had eased and there was freshness in the air that was positively exhilarating. I wished him luck on his journey. 'Stick to it,' I said. 'It will change your life.'

I covered thirty-three kilometres that day which took me to within seventeen kilometres of the Burke and Wills Roadhouse.

CHAPTER 22

Burke and Wills turn it on

19 – 25 August, days 137 – 143

(Burke and Wills Roadhouse – Lat: 19:13.638 Long: 140:20.828)

I arrived at Burke and Wills roadhouse before lunch. What a name for a roadhouse! Wonderfully appropriate because it was right on the explorers' route. Burke and Wills shows on maps as a town but there is nothing there except the roadhouse. Move a hundred metres in any direction and you are right back in the desert.

It is a conglomeration of buildings, softened somewhat by shady trees casting welcome shade from summer's fierce heat. There is a massive pull-in for trucks, and a bar and dining room. At the back are two rows of dongas which look like refrigeration containers but which in reality are bedrooms equipped with beds of venerable ancestry. Of more interest to me were the showers, off to the rear of the complex.

Burke and Wills is not normally a busy place but the day I arrived there must have been 250-plus people milling around. And there were horses everywhere. The camp draft was in town and people had come in from stations scattered across an area the size of some European countries. This, I realised, was tin-rattling country.

First I met Dean, the roadhouse manager, who gave me the collection tin Janne had mailed me. I also booked in to the campsite where I discovered that the ground in these parts was as hard as the people who lived there. There was also a certain pungency in the air, a pungency which I had not experienced before. It took me a while to identify it, then it hit me – I had camped downwind and adjacent to the camel stables.

I stayed at the draft for two hours collecting money and hoeing in to a hamburger and chips, courtesy of the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

I decided to stay at Burke and Wills an extra day. One reason was that Bill was still in Newcastle and I was not due in Karumba until Sunday 2 September, two weeks away.

Two weeks! I was finally nearing the end. I had put most of Australia behind me and I was within three hundred kilometres of the coast. Soon I would be able to smell the sea. I wondered how I would adapt to a normal life again. I had become accustomed to distant horizons and the loneliness of the inland traveller. For me luxury was now a warm night with a campfire spitting and spluttering in the darkness. A bed and a square meal were unexpected treats. I had grown used to my own company. I had never had a problem with living by myself but this had been different. There had been many long days when I had seen hardly anybody, but soon I would be surrounded by people. And traffic. And rules and regulations.

Next morning I met Jennifer and Andy, two grey nomads staying in the caravan park. They were travelling with their grandson who had cerebral palsy as a result of being severely shaken by his mother. They had taken the child under their wing and were introducing him to the ways of the outback.

They were an assorted bunch at Burke and Wills. There was a young woman in her twenties, straight out of the flower generation, who had found her nirvana driving around inland Australia in her old car. Another woman, a frustrated evangelist, leaned over the caravan park fence and spent the best part of twenty minutes trying to convert me to Christianity. And there was Bob Kelly who played the stock market and had felt the need to get away from it all and re-charge his batteries.

My favourite character was Coffo, an unassuming Aboriginal bloke who was in the horns of a dilemma. I had chatted with him several times at Burke and Wills but as I was about to leave he revealed, somewhat glumly, that his boss had offered him his truck to start his own haulage business.

'Hey, that's great,' I said. 'When do you open up for business?'

Coffo's demeanour remained downbeat. 'The thing is he's offering to finance the purchase price on really good terms,' he said.

'So what's the problem?'

Coffo shuffled his feet. 'I don't know if I could do it. Maybe I let him down. Then what?'

I took a deep breath. 'Coffo, if he didn't think you could do it, he wouldn't have made the offer. He's got faith in you mate.'

He remained unconvinced. 'I dunno, Jeff. Big responsibility.'

'Give it a go, mate,' I said. 'He trusts you. If it doesn't work for some reason you can always hand the truck back to him and thank him for the opportunity.'

I worked on him for a long time but I left him still wondering what he should do.

Things happen at places like Burke and Wills. Soon after I left, fire broke out in an outlying station's cool room, while the men were out mustering. The only adult at home was the governess who, though adept at teaching, was less than useful when confronted with a major fire threatening to destroy the homestead. She telephoned the fire brigade at Cloncurry but they were more than two hundred kilometres way. What happened next was like something out of an American movie. Other stations were alerted to what was happening and within half-an-hour three helicopters had landed near the homestead, and the blaze was brought under control. The cool room was destroyed but the rest of the complex was saved. That evening two carloads of station people, including the governess and firefighters, drove quietly into Burke and Wills, had a few beers and sat down to a steak as though nothing had happened.

*

Sonny, a beautiful young Kiwi working at the roadhouse, organised a free breakfast. I had spent some time talking to her the previous night and had photographed her carrying my pack. She had been interested in my journey and I had left her contemplating an expedition similar to my own.

When I walked away from Burke and Wills next morning I was immediately in a flat bleak country of dead trees with dry spindly branches no more than two metres high. Very occasionally there was a dead gum of perhaps five metres. I wondered for the millionth time what the early explorers, such as Burke and Wills, must have thought of this land which offered little food or water or even the comfort of shade.

I came to a road sign: 269 kilometres to Karumba. It seemed utterly impossible that in front of me, less than a fortnight's walk away, the sea was lapping at Australia's northern shore. After more than four months of endless dryness I was approaching equally boundless water. I felt a tinge of sadness that my walk was coming to an end. I was still enjoying every day, and I knew that once I arrived and had a decent rest, I would be itching to go again.

A truckie stopped. It was Lyall, I'd met him at the last roadhouse. He said G'day and gave me a can of soft drink. Twenty minutes later I watched in awe as a triple road train carrying road base from the south, made a U-turn and, still moving, dumped a hundred tonnes of gravel on the roadside. He had made a round trip of four hundred kilometres and delivered his load without stopping.

By late afternoon the dead grass was so thick along the roadside I had trouble finding anywhere to pitch my tent. I settled for an area on the fence

Cadelga homestead ruins.

Welcome to Queensland. No place is too remote to be overlooked for signage.

This little fella had me jumping for dear life when it reared during a close-up photographic session.

I reckon I was one of the few travellers to pass through these doors and not order a cold beer – I had taken the pledge years earlier and was satisfied with a soft drink.

Camel racing at Boulia.

Chris the postman and professional cameleer taking a break at Bedourie. His postal run covers four hundred kilometres-plus. He owns a team of about eight camels which he uses on expeditions into the Simpson Desert.

My red tent blended nicely with the inland dirt.

A framed sunrise south of Burke and Wills.

Ant hills lend an eerie atmosphere at Warren Vale Station, south of Normanton.

Mission accomplished. I dip a toe in the Gulf of Carpentaria at Karumba.

line. I was concerned about fire coming through but by far my biggest fear was wild pigs. I knew there were thousands of them in the area, I was by now seeing them quite regularly among the road-kill. I had also met up with professional and amateur pig shooters with their leather-protected dogs. Wild pigs are dangerous animals and I dreaded having them discover my tent while I was asleep.

Sure enough, I had not been walking long next morning when a couple of young blokes pulled alongside in their pig shooting rig.

'Got enough water?' asked the driver.

They were a tough-looking duo, both bearded and heavily tattooed. I couldn't help noticing that the passenger was cradling a rifle with telescopic sights across his lap. His feet were on the dashboard and he appeared to be dozing. But then he looked at me through half-closed lids, settled himself more comfortably and closed his eyes again.

'I asked if you had enough water,' repeated the driver. His tone was friendly but I was uneasy. Perhaps I was thinking of my last encounter with the rock-throwing hoons near Quorn.

Gathering myself, I said, 'Plenty, thanks mate. Thanks for stopping though.'

He nodded, looked me over, engaged gear and drove off. I was not unhappy to see them leave; I was half-prepared for the driver to take a 'mirror shot' over his shoulder at me.

You're getting neurotic, Jeff.

James the ex-army truckie stopped again and handed over a big fat sandwich from Burke and Wills roadhouse. He had intended buying it but when he told Sonny it was for me, she gave it to him.

I had lunch at a roadside table under a shelter at Dana Hill. My first visitor was an old codger who seemed determined to see out his last days on the road.

Then two Jehovah Witnesses turned up. There was no attempt at conversion this time and they held back from delivering a sermon. However, they did leave me some water and bread and cheese.

Later in the afternoon a four-wheel-drive pulled over with two young women, Jody and Meg, on board. They had also seen me at Burke and Wills. They had no caravan, no trailer and no luggage. Although they had not spoken to me there, they had asked about me and had decided to stop when they saw me and offer me a night's stay at Warren Vale Station 'just up the road'. It was another case of 'just up the road' in a car but a fifty-kilometre-plus walk for yours truly.

The road out of Burke and Wills was dead straight for fifty kilometres and I covered thirty-six of them that day. I was feeling as fit as a fiddle, it was almost as though I was floating along. I decided it must have been all the extra nourishment I'd received. Or maybe it was the JW's bread and cheese.

I again had to resort to camping on the fence line. I hung my sweat-soaked shirt on the fence to dry and gathered a pile of 'chuckable' rocks outside my tent – in case of wild pigs.

I was away early next morning. We had agreed some time back to skip the morning radio sched, and this had allowed me to pack my antenna after I finished my evening session. It also meant I was beating the heat – I was usually packed and away before the sun was up.

The bitumen road had made walking easier but the heat from the surface was now causing the balls of both my feet to blister. The skin under my toes was also becoming tender. I was trying to counteract this by wearing three pairs of socks, which was not a problem – I had deliberately chosen boots a size too big to accommodate them.

The number of anthills had increased dramatically; there were thousands of them stretching as far as I could see on both sides of the road. Rising to a metre, they are extraordinary examples of nature at work. They create a cathedral atmosphere in which pillars of uniform redness and construction dwarf everything around. There was one every couple of metres with bases half a metre wide. I had the strange feeling of walking through a land that was silent and dormant but which concealed feverish activity on an unimaginable scale.

A signpost appeared in the distance. It is a measure of the isolation in these parts that a signpost, indeed anything man-made, will lift the traveller from his torpor, raising his awareness to the point where his curiosity is peaked. In the city it can take a train crash to arouse such interest. Out here, a distant signpost is just as effective.

My stride lengthened a little and I crossed to the other side of the road so that I would be able to read the sign as early as possible.

It informed me that I was 120 kilometres from Normanton and, more importantly, that Cloncurry was 259 kilometres behind me.

Normanton is on the Norman River, about forty kilometres as the crow flies from Karumba on the Gulf of Carpentaria. (I say 'as the crow flies' because getting there by road involves travelling thirty kilometres north-east then turning west for another forty kilometres). Distance had long since lost any meaning for me; I judged it by the time it took me to walk and I reckoned that that put Normanton within four or five days – Sydney to Newcastle. You can see why a signpost generates so much excitement.

I came across a team of fencing contractors, another sure indication of approaching civilisation. The men were putting in twenty kilometres a day of four-strand barbed-wire, which was almost as fast as I was walking. The government was supplying the materials, the pastoralists were coughing up for the labour.

About mid-morning I came to a local landmark which labours under the unusual name Bang Bang Jumpup. I have no idea how it came to be called that, however, it marked a dramatic change of scenery. There was a drop in elevation of about twenty metres but it was the way the landscape changed that was quite astounding. The country had been scrubby with dead trees and some grass but when I reached Bang Bang Jumpup there were no trees and lots of grass. I had been warned to be careful of wild pigs and crocodiles, however, I was unsure which posed the most danger, the pigs, the crocs or the people who go out shooting them.

There was still no sign of the turnoff to Warren Vale where the two women, Jody and Meg, had offered me accommodation, but I knew it couldn't be far. I had already walked thirty-eight kilometres but I decided that if I reached the turn-off within reasonable time, I would go in.

Suddenly it was there. The sign said it was five kilometres to the station and it was already 4.15pm. I raised them on UHF but Jody and Meg, both jillaroos, were out killing a cow. A few minutes later a four-wheel-drive arrived to take me to the homestead.

This was a difficult situation because my self-imposed rule from the outset was that I would not accept a lift. However, I was pretty tired by this stage and, if I agreed to go with them, I would be starting my walk from where I was picked up. I accepted the lift.

I was taken to the shearers' quarters, now used by contractors, and shown a neat, compact room with an adjoining shower and laundry.

I unpacked, showered and, attired in my best T-shirt, shorts and thongs, I presented myself to the barbecue area where everybody was gathered for a feast of spare ribs, courtesy of a Brahman which had doubtless hoped for a better kind of day.

My hosts were Graham, his partner Olive, and Jody and Meg. We sat around the barbecue until late at night, they telling yarns and me recounting the story of my walk. I repeatedly offered to fix or repair something in return for their hospitality but Graham would have none of it. 'You are our guest,' he said.

The following morning Graham insisted on allowing Jody to drive me to the main road. I protested strongly but he was adamant.

It was another busy day on the road. Graham passed me in a grader – he

was doing some work at the other end of the vast property. Then a couple of grey nomads pulled up in a Ford Transit camper bearing the slogan: Adventure before Dementia. We had a cup of tea, some biscuits and the remains of the previous night's pasta. Very tasty.

Then Peter and Mary pulled over in their four-wheel-drive. I had spoken to Peter (VK2YGM) on the radio a long time back, and he had once stopped for a chat on his way north. They had since been across to Burketown and Lawn Hill and they were about to head east from Normanton, when they got to talking about me. They figured I would be about thirty kilometres from Normanton and, on that hunch, had set out to find me. In fact I was seventy-five kilometres out but, undeterred, they had pressed on. I was glad they did because apart from enjoying their company, they fed me up with fruit and coffee and promised to arrange accommodation for Bill and me when we reached Karumba.

When they turned back to Normanton I began wondering how the hell I was managing to walk more than thirty kilometres a day with all these interruptions. It would be interesting to see how much I covered if I walked fourteen hours a day with no visitors and minimal stops. Probably sixty kilometres.

I came to a pile of caravan debris. The caravan, obviously weakened by corrugated roads, had disintegrated, spewing its contents everywhere. The owners had gathered up their most valuable possessions and driven off leaving the rest on the side of the road.

The bridge across Flinders River was signed with the following: 'WARNING. ACHTUNG. Crocodile attack can cause serious injury or death.' The message was repeated in Chinese. Gingerly, I crossed the river, pausing half way to gaze down at a kilometre of water, the remnants of the last rains. It was calm and muddy and I was sure – well, I was fairly sure – that I could see crocs sun-baking on the banks.

I chose my campsite very carefully; it was as high as I could get and well away from the water. While setting up camp I spoke to two or three passing truckies on the UHF hand-held. Soon afterwards an Aboriginal woman pulled in and introduced herself as Mary. She had her UHF on 40, the truckie's channel, and had picked up enough of my conversations to realise I was walking across Australia. She worked at Century Mine and was on her way into Normanton with some company-donated soft drinks and lollies for one of the local football teams. I'm afraid the team missed out on one can of Sprite and a handful of lollies.

I could not find my towel next morning. I spent an hour looking everywhere but to no avail. It was ridiculous. Because it had been a windy night

and a couple of my empty water containers had blown some distance away, I thought perhaps the towel had ended up in the bush. I widened my search – nothing. Had it been stolen? Don't be stupid. Could a wild pig have taken off with it? Take a hold of yourself, Jeff. It was infuriating. It was a worthless piece of material – I could wrap the radio in my trackies and dry myself on a T-shirt – but that wasn't the point. Where the hell was it? Furiously, I packed up and resumed my walk.

I'd been going a couple of hours when it hit me. I pulled out my MP3 digital voice recorder and spoke into it: 'The towel is in the bottom of the sleeping bag stuff-sack,' adding: 'idiot!'. Of course it was. I had been putting it there every night to use as a pillow. It was the first thing into the bag and the last thing out. And I remembered that the sleeping bag had been particularly hard to pack away that morning. I walked the next kilometre shaking my head. I'd heard of people going troppo, was it happening to me?

There was heavy traffic. Some people waved to me, some tooted and the more curious pulled over to ask questions. One was a young lady called Anne who gave me a 1.25 litre bottle of lemon soft drink and two bars of chocolate.

James, my ex-army truckie, stopped again with another sandwich and iced coffee from Sonny at Burke and Wills. What a girl!

CHAPTER 23

A wild car chase

26 – 31 August, days 144 – 149

(Normanton – Lat: 17:40.185 Long: 141:04.644)

Being a Sunday, I rang Macca and had another three minutes on air. It was brief and to the point but I knew that people all over Australia were now following my progress and becoming increasingly aware of DeafBlind. I was achieving something.

By 8.30am I was down to a couple of mouthfuls of water and I was getting thirsty. There was nothing for it but to stop and beg.

Begging is not something that comes easily to me but this time, I wasn't concerned. I had lost count of how many people had stopped to ask if I needed water – I would just sit down on the side of the road and wait for it to happen again.

Of course, it didn't work. I sat for half-an-hour, exchanging friendly waves with friendly passers-by without one of them stopping and inquiring about my water situation. Looking back on it, it was probably because I was on a fairly busy road. If I had been in the middle of the desert nearly everybody would have stopped.

Less subtle action was called for.

I unscrewed the cap from an empty two-litre cordial bottle, took up a position on the road verge and, when the next car approached, I extended my arm holding the bottle upside down.

The first vehicle stopped. It was Mary in a neat little camper van who was wandering through the north in search of work and adventure. With great difficulty she angled my container under her sink tap and filled it with water. Mary was from the northern suburbs of Sydney and used to visit a hairdresser next door to an internet café I had once run in Cromer, near Dee Why. A small

world. I waved her goodbye, made up a litre of milk and scoffed the lot.

I was still smacking my lips when I rounded the next corner, only a hundred metres away, and came to a billabong where cattle were drinking and two cormorants were drying their wings after a spot of fishing. It was undoubtedly drinkable water but I didn't top up – I had a full belly and a spare litre which should get me through the next few hours to Normanton.

A little before midday I arrived at an intersection coming in from Savannah Way which leads to Broome. A big four-wheel-drive was parked under the sign and, as I approached, an Aboriginal woman called Bonnie climbed out and introduced herself. She said she was from a government department which dealt with physical disabilities, and that she had a message for me from a Margaret Henry, in Cairns. She said that Margaret had heard an ABC regional Queensland broadcast several weeks ago and had been following my progress ever since. Margaret had a vision-impaired grandson and was a prominent Aboriginal artist who visited this area regularly to teach and talk about painting. She would be arriving in Normanton in a week and was looking forward to meeting me.

I was almost blown away.

*

The town of Normanton emerged ever so slowly in the distance. First an indistinct muddle of habitation then, on my right, the cemetery. I was filled with curious, heart-swelling emotion. I had a lump in my throat; I think I could have shed a tear. I felt like one of those early explorers who, having spent months in places no man had been before, was returning to familiar surroundings.

As I drew level with the cemetery a white man came through the gate, turned right towards Normanton and, without a word, began walking a hundred metres ahead of me. He was wearing long trousers and an open-neck shirt but he was barefoot. I was mesmerised. It was as though he had not seen me. There was no greeting, not even a nod of the head, and he at no time looked back, though I was keeping pace with him. It was just the two of us. I was also intrigued by his ability to walk barefoot on the hot bitumen, when I could feel the heat coming through three pairs of socks and walking shoes. I followed him for fifteen minutes until he turned left and disappeared.

I came to a service station, more an open area workshop with a couple of bowsers, then a butcher's shop and a smattering of commercial buildings and houses. The footpaths were unpaved and the town struck me as generally untidy. A few houses boasted green lawns, otherwise it was dirt and more dirt.

I dropped into a caravan park – which was expensive – and inquired if Janne had booked me in. No such luck.

Feeling a little let down I continued my walk into town to the Purple Pub.

It was well named, I had never seen a more purple establishment. It stood out like a bonfire on an icefloe. I wouldn't describe it as being in the very best of taste, however, it certainly proved to be a magnet at night time.

There was another caravan park diagonally opposite a store and government building. I walked past it and another pub, the Central Hotel-Motel, by which time I had pretty well traversed Normanton. When I came to a bridge across the Norman River and saw no more buildings on the other side I was satisfied that Normanton had no more to offer.

I backtracked to the Central Hotel where a well-behaved though rowdy crowd was getting stuck in. I was about to walk on when I was hailed by the woman who had given me the Sprite soft drink while on her way to the footy final. Her team had apparently won and they were in the middle of celebrating. She sat me down with her friends, introduced me all round and sent off for a lemon squash.

My next call was at the general store where Phil (another pig shooter who looked the part) and his wife Kerry stocked me up with sausage rolls and something called cheese sausage. Thus re-supplied, I ambled across to the caravan park and booked in for four days to wait for Bill who was driving up from Newcastle. I was given a grassed area near the ablution block and laundry.

When I returned to the general store Phil and Kerry's kids, Jayden, Jesse, and Talesha asked me if I would give a talk on my walk to the school assembly, wearing full battle dress. I said I was happy to but asked them to arrange it through the school. It didn't take long – by the end of the afternoon I was booked in for a ten minute gig the following morning.

I fell asleep feeling that my job was almost done. Not quite: I still had to dip my feet in the Gulf of Carpentaria, another seventy kilometres away.

*

I was awake early next morning and, after photographing the sunrise at Norman River bridge, I made a full reconnoitre of the town (which didn't take long) before returning to the general store for breakfast. Phil waved a hand over the shelves, saying, 'Help yourself.' I liked this guy.

I found the school where I was to talk and went back to my tent to 'kit-up'.

When I returned to the school I was surprised to find 150 kids waiting in the assembly area with the staff lined up around them. I thought strewth, Elton John wouldn't have pulled this many.

After the usual assembly things had been dealt with, I was introduced to the multitude. They took in my beard (which had by now reached Father Christmas proportions), my solar panel and all the rest of my paraphernalia,

and immediately fell silent. I guessed that they had not seen anything quite like it before. I talked for about ten minutes about my walk and DeafBlind then invited questions. These came thick and fast, in fact we were still going strong when, twenty minutes later, the headmistress butted in, bringing things to a close. They gave me a hearty round of applause and filed off to their classrooms talking animatedly about my project. The headmistress said she had never seen the kids so quiet and attentive.

I spent the rest of the day chatting to townspeople and killing time. But I was looking forward to the following day when my brother Bill was due in from Newcastle.

*

He arrived in a 1994 Commodore wagon which Steve Corney of Tyres and More, Sydney, had prepared for me. You will remember that I met Steve at the Bash at Innamincka, and that he had promised to check over any vehicle I bought for my return journey across Australia. Steve had bought the car I had specified a month earlier and delivered it to Bill. He had even thrown in some sign writing on the doors, advertising the walk. He had delivered it to Bill in Newcastle – and now Bill had brought it to Normanton.

I was sitting outside the general store when he drove down the main street, made a U-turn at the next intersection near the Central Pub and glided back to the shop.

What a reunion. Bill and I had been close all our lives and we had been in radio or telephone contact every day of my walk. He had spent countless hours running around doing errands at my beck and call, and he had posted parcels to me. He had lived my journey and, as I watched him climb stiffly from the car, I was filled with gratitude for his contribution. In another five days my walk would be finished and, if icing on the cake were needed, Savannah Shores Lodge at Karumba had offered us seven days' free accommodation as arranged by VK2YGM (Peter and Mary). Life, I reckoned, did not get much better.

We spent the next day and a half exchanging news, talking to Phil and Kerry and generally relaxing. The only problem we had was changing the car's NSW registration to Queensland, and transferring it into my name. It wasn't easy. At the courthouse for instance I had to hand in the old plates and go through another 'what-exactly-*is*-your-address?' routine. Then it was off to the police station for a vehicle inspection – where nobody was qualified to do the work. There was also the little matter of number plates – the car now didn't have any. The policeman said it was okay to drive around town – which was all very well, but I wanted to be away the following morning. Welcome back to the bureaucracy, Jeff.

We retired for the night, determined to make a fresh start on the problem in the morning. I slept in my tent and Bill was in his swag, right alongside the car. Intent on getting as good a night's sleep as possible, Bill carefully placed his shorts under his pillow and, smacking his lips contentedly, slipped into a deep sleep.

A very deep sleep.

*

Some time early in the morning, probably between 2am and 3am, four youths walked into the caravan park and crept stealthily to within touching distance of Bill. Incredibly, one of them managed to remove my brother's shorts from under his pillow without waking him. Then, taking the car keys from his pocket, the intruder slithered away to his three mates.

The four quietly opened the car door, engaged neutral and pushed the vehicle out of the camping area. Once on the road, they started the engine second try, gunned it and roared off into the night.

I woke up about 3.30am, needing to answer a call of nature. Swearing under my breath, I eased out of the tent and, with eyes half-closed, tottered across to the camping area's toilet. I returned feeling much more comfortable and certainly more alert.

I glanced at my sleeping brother, stopped short and stood blinking at the empty space where my car had been. I was suddenly very alert.

'Hey, Bill!'

He stirred.

'Bill!'

'Wassa matter?'

'Where's the bloody car?'

Bill emerged from his swag rubbing his eyes. Slowly he focused on the empty space alongside him. Then he began blinking as well.

'Where's the car?' he said.

We both stood looking around as though expecting to find it elsewhere. If there had been a tree I'm sure I would have had a look among the branches. My voice went up a pitch or two: 'Where's it gone?'

'Some bastard's pinched it,' said Bill, his voice now on the same register as mine.

'But it couldn't happen,' I said. 'You were sleeping right next to it!'

'They've taken my bloody shorts as well,' screeched Bill. 'The keys were in the pocket. *Where's my shorts?*'

There was only one thing for it – a triple-O emergency call had to be made.

A triple-O at 3.30am in Normanton?

The call was made and, to the credit of the Normanton constabulary, a police car arrived and started a street-by-street search – again, not an overwhelmingly complex task. Minutes later a police siren split the morning silence. The chase was on.

Bill and I stood on the footpath, Bill without shorts, while the police went about their work.

High speeds were achieved until eventually the chase became too dangerous and the police fell back, content to follow my car's tail lights.

Bill and I went over to Phil's shop and knocked on the door. It was still only 4am. We drank tea and coffee and talked over how we would manage without the car. I could continue my walk but Bill was stranded. And I had a number of commitments which required my presence in Karumba.

The car thieves were meanwhile scorching around the place tossing things out of my car windows. With nowhere to go they finally steered into the bush, jumped clear while the car was still moving, and disappeared into the night. The Commodore careered through a barbed wire fence and came to a halt, dented, scratched, its windscreen rubber torn by the barbed wire and its speed warning alarm showing 180 km/h.

We were still discussing our own situation when, just before dawn, my missing car came in from the Karumba direction followed by the police vehicle. They had recovered the vehicle but the thieves had made their escape.

Utterly bewildered, we took stock. The radios were intact, a wallet and digital camera were under the seat and some cash was missing.

'Time for breakfast,' I said.

'First I need to borrow some shorts,' said Bill.

The rest of the morning was taken up with the vehicle inspection. I still had no plates but I was promised that they would be posted to my Queensland address.

(When I was driving back across Australia after the walk, the Department of Transport rang me from Cloncurry on my cell phone, to say that the plates could be collected there. By extraordinary coincidence I was actually in Cloncurry. To the astonishment of the bloke behind the counter, I arrived for the plates only minutes after he had called me. The car thieves had meanwhile been caught five days after fleeing Normanton. They were from Mt Isa and had gone to Normanton for a funeral. Six months later I had a letter from one of them apologising for what they had done – he had apparently learnt that I was raising money for charity).

Because of all the delays, it was 2pm before I was on the road out of

Normanton. Bill caught up with me an hour or two later, parked a kilometre ahead and walked back to meet me. We then walked to the car and he drove on to repeat the leapfrogging routine.

I covered only thirteen kilometres that day. We set up camp near a paddock gate and were briefly joined by two pig shooters and their three children. They had seven dead pigs in the back of their truck, all shot close to where we were camping.

I had my usual noodle soup for dinner. Bill had declared that he would eat the same as me on this night, however, knowing his liking for spicy food, I had saved him the packet of Thai noodles.

CHAPTER 24

Mission accomplished

1 – 2 September, days 150 – 151

(Karumba – Lat: 17:27.599 Long: 140:49.676)

The gulf country landscape captivated me. Where before it had been dry, there was now standing water. A bare land had turned into one in which trees crowded right up to the road, even leaning over it. A country in which wildlife was scarce had given way to one of great bounty where birds and animals proliferated. The hot dry air of the interior had turned humid and I reckoned that if I sniffed hard enough I would be able to smell the sea.

Getting Bill started at an early hour was not easy and it was eventually agreed that he would drive into Karumba to do some emailing.

I reached the fifty-kilometre marker at 8.15am. Thirty minutes later an Adelaide couple pulled over and said that they had seen signs on power poles in Karumba, advertising my imminent arrival.

*

It was 1pm on Saturday 1 September when I arrived at the T-junction to Karumba Point, just four kilometres from my finishing line. One more sleep! I deliberately chose the spot as my final campsite, though it was a fairly conspicuous position, and there was a good chance that camping was not allowed so close to the town. I took a punt, figuring that any ranger who made me move on would have to be pretty mean-spirited. Anyway, there was no sign banning camping.

We were soon joined by Bonnie and Beverley. Bonnie had brought me the note from Margaret Henry, the Aboriginal artist with the grandson with impaired vision who had been following my progress. It transpired that Bonnie and Beverley had been putting up signs around Karumba advertising my arrival, and inviting people to join me on my final four kilometres to the gulf.

Sixty kilometres to my Karumba finishing line.

When the two women left, Bill and I strung a tarpaulin between the car and a tree for some shade and threw down a couple of cushions for a measure of comfort. He had brought them all the way from Newcastle so we figured we had to make use of them.

Several cars tooted as they drove past. The drivers had either heard me on Macca or had seen the posters in town. Or perhaps it was the caravanners' grapevine.

We were turning our thoughts to lunch when a bloke pulled in with fish and chips and some cool drink from Ash's famous seafood and general store at Karumba. He said somebody had ordered it for us to save us having to cook. He also extended us a lunch invitation at Ash's when we reached our destination.

Bill and I spent the rest of the afternoon talking about the people we had met and how we would handle our entrance into town in the morning. The car complicated things but in the end, we decided that Bill would drive ahead and park the car at Savannah Shores Lodge, where we would be staying. He would then walk back to meet me in a park behind the lodge, and join me for the final stage to the gulf.

We had just started discussing what we would cook for dinner when Bonnie came back and invited us to a barbecue at Beverley's place. The offer was too good to refuse.

We arrived as scrubbed and polished as possible and allowed ourselves to be spoilt rotten. Since leaving Port Augusta I had fared well in the food department – much better than I had expected – but Beverley's steak and salads, the convivial company, the comfortable chairs and the warm fragrant air, combined to make my penultimate night unforgettable. Bill and I returned to our campsite just before midnight, ridiculously content in mind and body.

I set up my tent while Bill, with some misgivings, surveyed the ground alongside the damaged car for a suitable spot for his swag. After a while, he said, 'I think I'll sleep in the car.'

'Good idea,' I said.

I turned in, curiously undecided over whether to be glad it was almost all over, or sorry that it would soon come to an end. I seemed to have been walking a very long time – 150 days – yet the time had passed quickly. There had been discomforts but nothing compared with those experienced by explorers such as Burke and Wills whose footsteps I had roughly followed. And there were times when I had been frightened. Those rock-throwing hooligans near Quorn had worried me; so had the threat of wild pigs and dingoes. I had never doubted my ability to survive or to find my way to my next destination, but lonely graves and the skeletal remains of buildings and machinery had been constant reminders of the inland's unforgiving nature. However, I had done it and that was what gave me most satisfaction. I had planned the walk, I had equipped myself correctly and I had walked through the middle without having to holler for help. I was proud of that.

*

I was up by 6.30am, still quite unemotional about this, the final leg of my journey. I woke Bill and began packing everything for the last time. I knew I had to leave at 7.30 because I was expecting Bonnie and Leslie, and possibly others, to walk with me.

Beverley arrived at 7am as I was pulling on my walking shoes. It was immediately apparent that there was some confusion over whether I was starting the walk into town at 7.30am or 9am – the poster had been ambiguous.

We set off under a clear sky in perfect walking conditions. It would get warmer later in the day but when we left the camping area it was a beautiful Karumba morning – not too warm, not too cold with just a suggestion of a breeze to cool my brow. I put a spring into my stride.

We were a small but merry group, casually dressed and full of chatter about the walk and the possibility of the town being mentioned on Macca's show. We passed through open country where a water-filled depression was home to aquatic birds. Was the water fresh or salty? I wondered. It didn't matter

anymore.

Within an hour the first buildings appeared then a caravan park and a service station. Soon we were walking between houses with boats and sea-going trawlers parked on lawns and in drive-ways.

I was almost there. Now I *could* smell the sea.

It had been five months almost to the day since I had felt salt water on my skin and I had missed it. I had grown up on the shores of Botany Bay, most days riding my bike to Maroubra Beach for a swim. I had salt water in my veins, and now it was just down the road.

There were people around me, including Bill, but I was somehow walking on my own. Their chatter and the fall of their footsteps became distant, lost almost as though they were all a long way away. I felt as though I was floating again – floating towards a place that had been beckoning me for a long, long time.

We walked, rather awkwardly, through the grounds of Savannah Shores Lodge, emerging on the waterfront.

I crossed the grass verge, negotiated a gently sloping rocky area to the hard sand and stopped on the beach. The water was thirty metres way. It was dead calm but I could feel the ocean air, as soft as a kiss. I breathed it in, almost intoxicated by the tang of it. I thought of all that land behind me, the dry creek beds, the motionless windmills, the station homesteads where Sunday breakfasts were being prepared, the little towns and their pubs and general stores, the historic buildings where ghosts of years past lingered silently.

The people.

It had been the people who had made my journey. I may have salt water in my veins but there is the dust of the never-never there as well. And it is the people who have made the never-never legendry. For five months I had enjoyed to the full the open-hearted generosity of the people of the outback, and it would be they I would remember for the rest of my life.

I was at the water's edge. Bill was in front of me taking pictures which was brave of him considering the crocodile warnings.

I felt the water lapping at my ankles. It was much warmer than Spencer Gulf but that was to be expected. I was 2500 kilometres nearer the equator .

I took a deep breath, turned and re-joined the small crowd. As I did so somebody asked, 'How did all this start, then?'

'Well, I said, 'I was sitting in my caravan annexe on Allan Creek – that's near Brisbane, you know – listening to the ABC when …'