# GULF TO GULF

To Nicola

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## The Long Walk

As told to Cyril Ayris

Pictures Jeff Johnson

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Jeff Johnson

Design: Cyril Ayris and Gabriella McNally

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**Half the profits from the sale of this book will be donated to the DeafBlind Association of NSW.**

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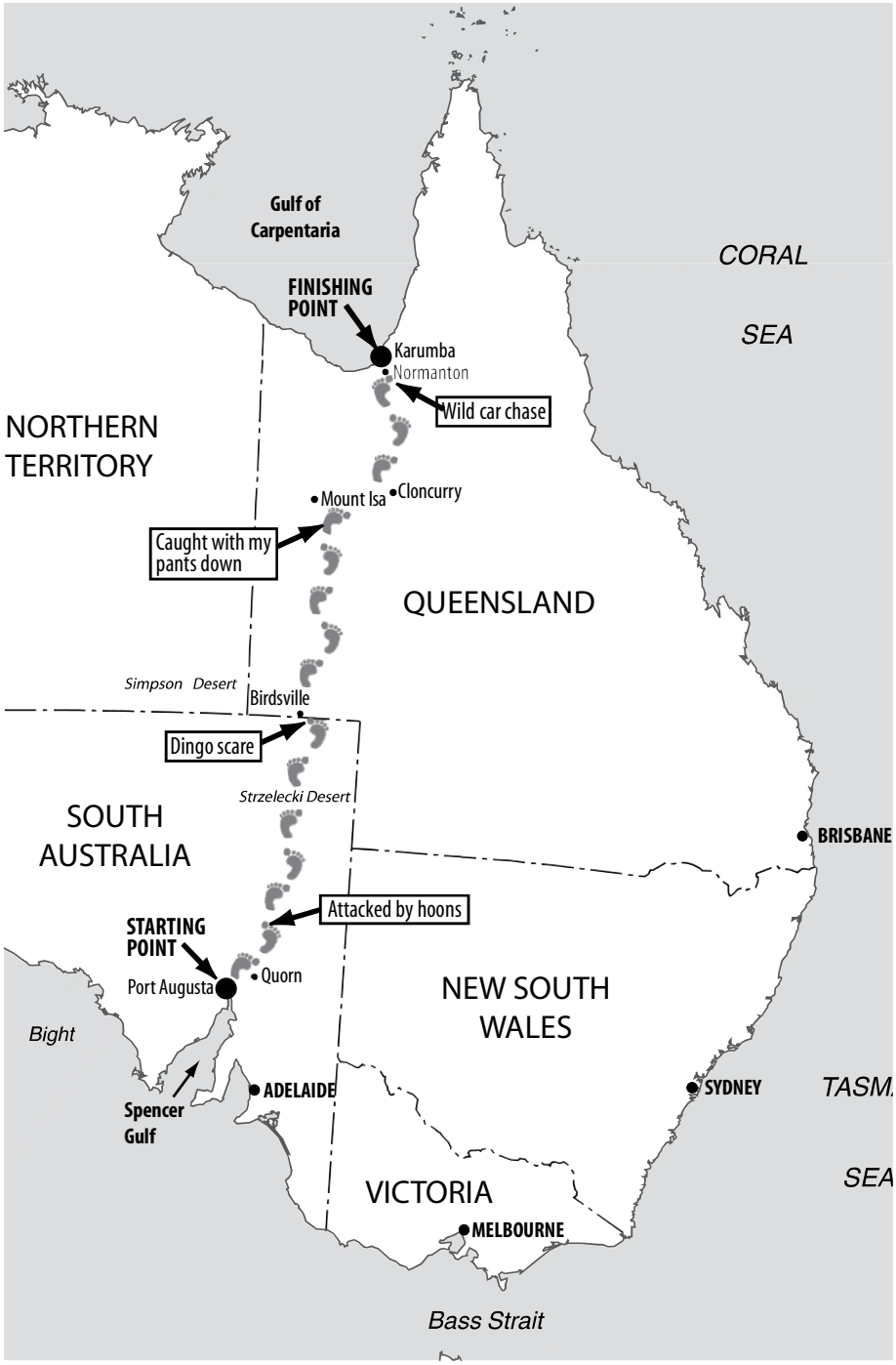
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# CHAPTER 1

# 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.