

Outback Epic Bicycle Adventure Challenge Race Showcase Wrap





Fig 1 My gear being loaded at Ayers Rock resort

I would be in no condition to ride the following day, the doctor assured me, after prescribing pills and tablets for my back spasms and cramps, which had totally incapacitated me on the Friday, on arriving at Lasseters, Alice Springs, from Ayers Rock. I think the cause was a chill on the back the previous night at Ayers Rock Resort. Hotel staff had kindly driven me to Dr Kong, after making an appointment, Fosters Pharmacy and the massage

centre. I was inclined to believe him, but had faith in the power of the medicine man, his prescriptions and my own stubbornness in not giving-up. I would not miss this

adventure without a fight. At 12pm I was in the hotel room, resting, hardly able to move without getting the most painful cramps; by 6pm I had dressed and ventured downstairs to assemble my new MTB from its air-freight carton. Lazarus take note!

Satisfied with the result, I had a burger, and my confidence growing, ventured into the



Fig 2 Lasseters Hotel and Casino, Alice Springs

gambling halls of Lasseters and held my own with the slots for several hours. Next morning I was still somewhat stiff and sore, but improving and willing to give it a go, and so made ready to be picked-up at 7am for the tour. No one came. Hotel staff rang the tour office in Adelaide and finally made arrangements for 12. Now for some sight-seeing, I thought, and rode fearlessly but carefully over the Todd and into Alice, stopping at The Broken Spoke for minor adjustments. My return to Fosters Pharmacy was greeted by disbelief and finally good wishes. I stopped at the supermarket for two thermal singlets, and

saw something of the town, including the Flying Doctor office, on the return ride to Lasseter's. That was significant for me, because I had begun reading "Flynn of the Inland" while at Ayers Rock.

Day 1 Simpson's Gap



Fig 3 Dinner after Simpson's Gap day 1

At 12 I was picked up, including my oversize, overweight bag and bike, raring to go. It transpired the main body of the tour had left for Simpson's Gap that morning. The decision to abandon the tour was made because of the sustained rain in the previous few days. I was to join the tour on its new route after a 25km ride from Simpson's Gap that evening. Ralph, whom I had met earlier,

indicated that I should start and he would catch me up in a few minutes. Like hell, I thought, and pushed the pedals. After a sustained effort, I reached the campsite

without having been passed and began setting up the tent and meeting the other riders. That evening, the group decided to start the scheduled ride, albeit a day late, because the



Fig 4 Peleton at morning tea day 2

weather gods seemed to be favorable. We would be driven to Alice airport and start the epic from there. Several intrepid perfectionists decided to ride to the airport, and meet us there, rather than be bussed. I was happy to start from the airport.

Day 2 Santa Theresa

The ride was on in earnest, the first leg taking us down the track via Santa Theresa mission, about 70 km. The road was gravel and uneven initially, but I thought things were going well, and pushed hard. My back had recovered

miraculously, but I continued to take my medicine for some days, becoming the butt of jokes about speed, doping and valium. Suddenly a rider appeared to my right, shouted hello and passed me as if I were standing still. I thought, bugger, it's a woman. Now how can she be going so fast, I wondered, while Charlie, as it turned out to be, made me

eat dust. My memories of the ride that day include some time riding with the attractive young English Lucy, as well as with other members, variable road surfaces, an inspection of the mission and myself reaching our campsite in reasonable condition. I noted that several riders, the "guns" of the group, with years of riding histories as long as my arm, had obviously reached the campsite hours before myself and the rest of the group, their tents and chores completed, functioning shower and feet up, looking bemused at the latecomers passing parade. I was by nature pretty competitive myself, but



Fig 6 George arriving at St Theresa's day 2

could not match their achievements, having started riding regularly only this year. I also thought that the social side of the experience was important, that meeting the other members of the group was paramount. I hatched a plan: I would leave early the next day and try to stay ahead of the bunch, and shared my thoughts with Ralph, whose stipulation was that I should wait for light. At some point, Peter explained the importance of appropriate tyre pressures and eased the pressure in my two considerably for the rough conditions.

Day 3 Breakout

The next morning I was off at first light, feeling good and making good time. My bike was light and equal to the task. I remember the deeply gorged wheelmarks in the mud and not much else, until I was passed by the lunch truck. Ruth complimented me on my progress. We set up lunch and soon company arrived. It was Charlie and Paul, I could have guessed, they were excellent riders. I bid my farewells, after checking the route and distance (about 25



Fig 5 After dinner day 3

km) to camp and was off, pedals turning and mud flying, no consideration for safety or bike. I felt good and made better time and reached the campsite first, although, of course, it was not a race. I was well satisfied with the pace that I had maintained for several

hours. That afternoon it was I who waited at the roadside for the stragglers and I put up the shower. To top it off, Rollo awarded me the Green Cap for my daring and initiative, that night, after dinner.



Fig 7 Camp and shower with mountain range day 3

Day 4 Tailend Charlie

On this day I had decided to begin by riding with Ralph and the satellite telephone. We were the last riders to leave. That morning I remember the long mountain range we needed to circumvent. Ralph was good company and his knowledge of the outback and area extensive. Lunch was close to a huge red sand dune, which, Lucy assured me, was worthy of climbing for the view. I only saw more sand dunes. After lunch I was the last to leave, but soon caught Ralph. Lucy and Rob. I think the couple from Canberra (Christine and Rod) was also there, or close by. They were dawdling as I approached, at a fast pace and put my foot down and passed them. That afternoon, I remember a long ride, which took us to the border with the Simpson Desert. Gibbers were littering both sides of the track, the western side shielded by a huge red sand dune, the eastern side emptied by the desert, as flat as a pancake.



Fig 8 Ralph just spotted the peleton in the distance

The camp was situated at the foot of the dune, across the gibbers, half a km from the track. I chose a spot beneath a gum tree, set up my things and hung stuff out over the branches. Returning later, I found largish black ants had invaded my pack, bike and almost everything else. They were after my staminade, the little black creeps. I thought to entice them away with a dump of the yellow powder behind the tree, some distance away and also moved my things. It seems that the plan worked. One of the drivers, Bill, had to leave the tour and was replaced by BT that

evening. She was introduced to each of us in turn. What I remember in particular was her large, warm smile. After dinner I was required, as was the custom, to pass on the Green Cap to a worthy successor. I decided, after some consideration, to make a joint



Fig 9 Christine amidst the infinity of the Simpson

award to Ruth, Bill and Peter, the support team and the unsung heroes of the ride, without whom it would not have been possible, accompanied by three cheers. Day 5 Andado I again started with Ralph, but we did not get very far because of punctures. Others also were affected. It was those little three cornered jacks, the bane of outback cyclists. We finally made some distance until the puncture demon struck again, this time beside a large pool of water, normally not available to riders in such predicaments. Ralph helped fix the tube. We were heading towards an intersection, about 8km away, which was the way to the Accacia Forest. I was not really so interested and said that I might ride on. Because of our

punctures, we were late and saw the trucks leave in the distance, and my decision was made for me. The intersection was signposted and against the post lent a dozen or so bicycles. One was partially dismantled, lying on the ground, obviously because of punctures.



Fig 10 Ralph day 4

Ralph was needed at the tail of the field and got to work fixing tyres, while I pushed on towards the Old Andado Station, where we were to meet for lunch. Along the way I recall being bored by the countless detours around local flooding. Ever thinking of progress, I vowed to take the next flood across the road head-on. It was a mistake. I was soon up to the pedals in mud and accordingly fell sideways into the ooze. My instant reaction was to look behind me for witnesses, but the desert holds onto its secrets. So much for the direct approach, I remember thinking.

I reached the deserted station and sought protection from the sun under the willows. I remember the telephone ringing and being without water, and countless ants scurrying about, perhaps indicating a weather change. A passing Telstra technician allowed me to fill the bladder of my hydration pack.



Fig 11 Old Andado station

It was then that I noted the leak. No wonder that I had run out. I lay down in the courtyard and fell asleep on the bar, an appropriate place for a nap. Peter woke me some hours later. He gave me a couple of rolls for lunch, packed by BT. One truck had become bogged in the mud. Some of the other riders were also at the station. The next half hour we were replenishing water supplies. It was late in the afternoon and clouds were gathering. Camp was reasonably close and we had dinner after a glorious sunset. That night a short thunderstorm struck, heavy rain and lightning. I had chosen to sleep in a swag that night, but was forced to set

up a tent at the last moment. It was cosy in the tent, with the hard rain knocking on the roof, but the storm did not last.

Day 6 I hit the Wall

Started after several riders, soon caught up to Christine. The going was heavy after the storm. She told me that Lucy had taken the wrong turn before the Andado Station and was worried. She would tell the trucks. I noticed her relaxing with Tai-chi the day before and had asked her previously the meaning of “Gitane”. She said it was French for gypsy woman. I could live with that, an interesting name for a bicycle. I gradually drew away, trying to find my own pace through hard going.



Fig 12 Rob having his 10km break

I was having water trouble again and the sand hills loomed. Two emus were racing me and winning. I was slowing and tiring fast. Riders appeared behind me,

passing me at will. Everyone was passing me, it seemed. This was a bad time for me, because of the sand and water problems. I limped into lunch, under an umbrella of gum trees near the Fink River. I stayed a long time, recovering. Rob had arrived and we agreed to ride together to Mt Dare. BT kindly lent me her water bottle. I had also picked up one discarded bottle, so now I had two: beggars can't be choosers.

Rob has a very disciplined approach to riding, which did not suit me entirely, but two were better than one and he was very supportive. His plan was to stop at every 10km for drink and rest. Not being weaned from my hydro system yet, I found it difficult being unable to drink when I needed it. Nevertheless, his optimistic mood was contagious and we made reasonable time. We saw great washouts on this last section, riding through wooded areas. Several times we stopped, choosing newly born green grass to lie on.



Fig 13 Mt Dare pub, yes it was painted green!

Time was running-out and the sun was low. Suddenly we were free of the forest and onto an endless plain. In vain we searched the horizon for any signs of mountains or settlements, or other clues to Mt Dare. A sign heralded 5km to go, they seemed endless. Bum, wrists, back and neck were sore and painfully distracting. Rob led the way. I kept asking how far to go, for my computer was missing. We seemed to be heading for a line of trees, still some distance away, but there were no mountains in sight; the land was flat as a pancake. Suddenly we spotted a windmill, that silent sentinel of the outback. From there it was not far, we rode into the camping ground at dusk,

amid applause from the others.

After setting-up my tent, swags were out because of the great silent mosquito pestilence. Then, after a shave and warm shower, I made my way to the main building, of which one room was a pub. Joy was great at my first beer – a XXXX, then others, the price of \$4 a can was irrelevant. Behind the counter served young Nick, whose German accent I recognised immediately. He was on a working holiday. We exchanged brief histories over the bar, interrupted only by more beer. Outside was a long table, around which the others had congregated. Suddenly there was some commotion: Ralph had announced his arrival with his Claxton. Then, at last, the affable noise of the pub people was broken by applause for Christine and Rod, who had spurned a lift in the truck and ridden the last kms in the dark, a marvelous effort, because I know how much trouble I had.

For dinner that night our support people had organised a BBQ. Steak, sausages, fried potatoes, among others satisfied the pangs of hunger. I needed to buy insect repellent and so armed, sat at the table until late. My body needed plenty of fluid that night. I also bought a bottle of soft drink. I now had three bottles, sufficient, I thought, for a good day's ride. During the day I had noticed a knocking sound from my bike. I sought advice from Ralph, but next morning, after a good clean and oil of the chain, the noise was gone.

Day 7 Desert Oasis

Started on the right foot with eggs and bacon for breakfast. That day I waited for Ralph to complete paperwork and stayed with him for most of the time, until late afternoon, when



Fig 14 Local flooding day 6

we happened upon Christine and Rod. I remember some muddy parts just outside Mt Dare, through which the trucks drove with gusto, long low ranges along the western sky, to which we did not know the names. To pass the time I started inventing names and histories of any features we met, for Ralph did not know everything and was perhaps annoyed at my constant questions. Consistent with this theme was Three O'clock Creek, a curious name, for which we tried to make-up a plausible history. Peter came to meet us in the truck and as he passed, shouted "It's only another ~~ (garbled)~~ kilometers". We all thought that he was trying to make it

sound small when it was really big, and that this was very funny. Afternoon tea was in the company of Christine and Rod. Peter, in one of the trucks, went back in the direction of that timeless creek, to gather firewood for the campfire that night. Meanwhile, the



Fig 15 Dalhousie Springs sunset

landscape had changed to what one could expect on the moon, hills, valleys, plains with nothing else. A junction pointed us into three kilometers to Dalhousie Springs. What awaited us there in that short distance was a complete contrast, an oasis, clean camping grounds, date palms and other trees and shrubs, and wildlife, not at all wanting for water. A swim in the warm lake (38* C) made sick bodies well again. Dinner was good and plentiful, as always. That night I slept well, in a tent, for the mozzie plague had ambushed us again. O, how I would love to stay in this paradise for two nights.

Day 8 Paddy Melons

That morning as I awoke, the camping ground was strangely deserted. It seemed to me, that many riders had already left and I just saw Rod riding off, as I struggled with my tent



Fig 16 Dalhousie ruins

covers. Breakfast was a mere formality and I was soon struggling along the track we had come late last night. I didn't feel very strong, for some reason. The turnoff was to Dalhousie Ruins, 9km. Soon I saw the ruins of some buildings and signs of a substantial settlement. Just as I stopped to check my rear tyre, which seemed to be softer than usual, John sailed past. I soon joined him in reading about the history of Dalhousie on two plaques. There used to be a racecourse, as well, but no sign of it now. I continued, John was reading. There, I saw Rod in the

distance. Soon I joined him and we had some interesting conversations, I'm sure. He also assured me that my lack of strength in the morning was really because of a deceptive initial climb, out of the oasis. I felt relieved. At morning tea, Rod and I were relaxing, John had joined us, when in the distance I saw the big guns approaching. I was surprised



Fig 18 Typical scenery day 8

to see them, thinking they were miles ahead, but that was enough for me.

I mumbled my goodbyes and set off at a furious pace. The truck was still visible on the crest, some kilometers hence. I chased it until it disappeared, then I put my foot down and made the wheels sing. The landscape was very open and flat, with the occasional creek and trees, and gentle slopes. The road reasonable, but hard, and rocky in parts. So far, we had encountered little wind and there was no wind now. I flew. The suspension on the gypsy woman worked overtime. Then I started to look out for the lunch

truck, because it was that time. Anxiously, I looked for it. I saw it just in time. It was parked on the left hand side, at the start of the sand section, which would slow us for 8km. I carried the bike to the truck, in order to appease the puncture demons. Lunch was a bite and replenishment of water, and I was off.



Fig 17 The good Samaritans

Suddenly I could feel the bumps through my rear tyre and although soft was good in sand, I eventually stopped. Could I find anything? In my desperation, I threw all my things onto the road and eventually found one tyre lever, but the rear tyre would not shift, try as I might. I was desperate, expecting to see the peloton rounding the corner any minute. In my hour of need, some good Samaritans in the form of 2 four-wheel drive vehicles happened along and stopped to help. They even had a small compressor to inflate my tyres. There was some discussion about the other riders and then we waved our

goodbyes. They were gone and I was going, at last.

The day was warm and I often needed to stop for drinks, carrying them in my backpack I felt good and had no pain. Whenever I stopped, I glanced back, just to check for any sign



Fig 19 But which way is south?

of the others. The land was flat and few trees. Some buildings appeared, silos perhaps, but derelict, and a gate to be opened and closed. I could see the dust from vehicles approaching me. The people always waved. What must they be thinking, I wondered. Some were drinking beer. Oh for a cool can of beer. The country changed, suddenly there were trees on both sides and I had arrived at a junction. Now, which way to go. The general direction towards Oodnadatta was south, but which way was south, where's Rod, dammit? I needed his counsel.

Why didn't I have a map? I should have checked the route this morning. After some minutes of thought, I took the unmarked road, which was heading in a southerly

direction, and not signposted to Oodnadatta, a calculated gamble, I guess. I left a piece of paper on a bush, to indicate which way I had chosen, (as it turned-out, that was too subtle



Fig 20 The roller coaster ride

a clue) in case I ended up missing. I chose well, because soon I came out of the thick bush lined road to more open spaces and saw Hamilton station. I thought of dropping in and asking for a beer, or throwing myself at the mercy of the staff for water, for I was very low and it was very warm. Now began the roller-coaster of the sandhills, up and down, up and down. The distance between hills varied but ranged from about 250-400m. The hills were high enough and the surface good enough to get up a good head of speed under normal conditions, but on the way down and up again, the corrugations played havoc with the speed, very frustrating. They seemed endless. Tired

and thirsty, I was out of water.

At about 3pm, I stopped and sought shelter on the roadside shadows of the dense scrub. Now they'll catch me, for sure. But the truck with BT came instead to save me. My water replenished, I chased the truck, but my enthusiasm soon waned, for those hills seemed endless. I kept thinking, why did they not stop there, that place was suitable, this place is



Fig 21 BT making tea during the First Test

really picturesque, that place had a creek. Finally I arrived at the site. I set up my tent, did my chores, helped with the fire, and played cricket with BT using paddy melons as balls and spade as bat, amidst shrieks of laughter. It was a good ending to a long day. In dribs and drabs the peleton arrived, during the First Test, but they appeared not to appreciate the funny side of things. Later, Peter and BT engaged in a paddy melon throwing contest olympic challenge, with BT being adjudged the winner, being the best throwing arm melon missile chucker in the open section. My gears had been slipping,

so I asked Peter, the bicycle guru, for assistance. He took some time to adjust the rear derailleurs and we hoped to have solved the problem. Normally, a new bike needs adjustment after about 500km and it is part of the first free service.

Day 9 A good day for Oodnadatta I recall having to find the shovel, at about 4am, as usual, an unusual time for me otherwise. Rob and I must have agreed to ride together to



Fig 22 Scenery on the way to Oodnadatta

Oodnadatta, because I remember getting up early and being ready by sun-up, around 7am. However, Rob was not ready and he indicated, that he would catch up with me. I therefore set off. I soon realised, that my gears were slipping badly and stopped to make some adjustments, only just out of sight of camp, on the next sandhill. I muttered something and said the S word and I just turned this thing and hoped for the best. There was no mid range, but the gears did not slip, so I was

reasonably happy and resumed at a dawdling pace, for once enjoying the scenery and not feeling pressed for time, whenever I stopped for pictures. I carried my camera in my front handlebar basket, plus some other things.

My usual cargo consisted of two tubes, repair kit, tyre lever(s), pump, 3 water bottles, a couple of candy bars, some glucose tablets, which I called “speed”, for they had that effect, a rag and oil, for changing rear wheel, and servicing the chain, toilet paper, a flimsy wind cheater, lubricant for between the legs, deodorant, chewing gum and a lot of minor things lay on the bottom layer, which I have forgotten. I have no idea what the



Fig 23 Desert to Oodnadatta

others carried, that was obviously a taboo subject and not discussing the subject part of outback riding etiquette. I usually wore a pair of nicks, leggings, socks, shoes and cleats, thermal singlet, shirt, balaclava, sunglasses, gloves and helmet. Around my chest I wore a heart monitor, which sent the signals to the wrist watch-like instrument, that was mounted on the handlebars and showed heart rate, time and other things, which I did not understand. Also mounted there was a wireless bicycle computer, which was supposed to do everything but pedal. Alas, it was not illuminated, so I often had trouble reading it

without glasses.

My bike is a Gitane ATV Team, last year’s model, which I was able to buy at a very good price. The components were all very high quality, mostly XT. I bought it new, two weeks prior to the tour. It has three front gears (ranges) and nine rear ones. Now I was trashing it. It was thus in an easy frame of mind, that I was cycling along the countryside outback desert emptiness. Rob was a long time coming and eventually I spotted him,



Fig 24 Lucy and Rob sprung

with Lucy typical, I thought, chatting up the women. They were miles away, obviously, oblivious to me. The three of us reached Peter on a hill and morning tea together. Just as he was about to cut the fruit cake, BT arrived in the other truck and he ran the 50m to the road to speak to her with the only knife. I was getting a bit edgy by this time, and mounted my bike, moving off. I remember Rob calling out, probably in jest “Look out,

Eddie’s coming”. That’s all I needed. I was off in a flash and raced down the hill in a shower of stones.

I was chasing the lunch truck again. All was going well until the wind hit. It lasted all day into Oodnadatta. I fought and fought, stopped to recover, fought again. The 5km long clay pan would enable me to see any peleton, and vice versa, so I tried especially hard until I reached the forest on the other side and peered into the distance from the security of my hide. All quiet. Off I went again, the wind often slowing me down to 12kmph.

I thought of the peleton strategy of slip-streaming in such circumstances and pressed harder, being careful to concentrate on pushing down, as well as pulling up. It was very tiring and disappointing. The kilometers were being eaten ever so slowly.

Suddenly I saw BT and the lunch truck, they were still making preparations. I wanted to replenish water and keep going, but BT packed me some tuna and a spoon.



Fig 25 Easy decision, this time

Off I went again. Oodnadatta on Sunday is a dry town, we were told. I had an idea to stop the next vehicle and ask for a couple of cans. Soon three vehicles appeared, I flagged them down and they stopped as if in a convoy. All the passengers and drivers had cans in their hands. I explained the situation and that I wanted to be the only rider with a beer that night. The driver gave me one, mumbling something about “running short”. I wrapped it carefully. Suddenly there was a turn in the road to the right and a sign in the distance. It said: Oodnadatta 17km. Nearly there, I thought. Stopped for a drink and was off. Those were very long 17 km. I was stopping frequently, now, drinking and resting. Suddenly I heard a vehicle. It was Peter and he waved as he passed me. I kept going, on and on, there was the radio mast on a hill, so the town could not be very far. A truck came towards me, it was Peter, he stopped to chat. As I stopped, I glanced backwards and he said “Don’t worry, they’re a long way behind”. He added, the camping ground is behind the pink roadhouse”. I thought, good, behind the brothel. I rode on, I could see the town in the distance, it came ever so slowly, I stopped frequently for pictures, being careful to glance behind me. Suddenly I was riding up the main street. All was quiet. Where was the welcoming ceremony? I saw the Inland Mission Hospital, a solitary dog barked. Sadly, there was no one to greet me. The town had seen better days.

I made for the pink roadhouse, walked in with my bike, and grabbed a drink, ordered a burger, it came as an “Oodnaburger” served by Steffi, a young German tourist on a working holiday. While I was eating, huge plates of huge chips were being served to other guests. Then BT entered and I ordered one of those huge plates and she shared it



Fig 26 The Pink Roadhouse

with me. After such a feast I rode slowly to the camping site and set up my tent. BT was already unloading the truck, so I had access to my luggage. Then came a shower and shave and another shower, fully clothed, because I wanted the clothes washed. When I had some time to relax, I started a conversation with two German couples, who were on a 7month’s holiday in Australia. They had shipped all their gear, RV, tents BBQs etc, in a huge container. They were well rationed, including supplies of good wine and beer. When the drinking started soon after, I found myself with a bottle in my hand, sharing tales of adventures.

Afterwards, I talked to BT about my plans with the beer can, but she confided in me, that she was organizing beer and ice for the night, “ but it’s a secret”. “ I won’t tell a soul”, I said, suitably impressed by her enterprise and initiative and networking. Slowly the peleton limped in, not saying a word or giving me a glance. Later Rod and Lucy arrived, just prior to closing of the roadhouse, to which I directed them on the main street, for a cool drink. Later that night there was great pleasure and merriment when BT and I



Figure 27 No welcome

arrived with the surprise, a huge chill box filled with cans and ice. BT also had used her culinary skills to make a delectable desert, with whipped cream. Anything is possible, in an outback kitchen. (Old jungle saying)

Day 10 Road to the Painted Desert

The Turn-off was about 45 km from town, we were told.

Rob was not sure, that he would be fast enough to arrive there by the appointed time, 10am, but was adamant, that he wanted to ride all legs to Coober Pedy. 40 km by 10am would be a good ride. Most chose the easy option of the trucks. I did not share this particular passion, but he had asked me to accompany him, but that he would leave at about 6am, well before light. I agreed, but was running late in the morning, so he left and I was to catch up. After about a good half an hour, I left, it was still pretty dark, but light soon. I made good time and really pushed hard, to catch Rob as soon as possible. After a huge effort, I finally saw him. There he was, having a short bludge on a hill in the distance. Soon we were riding together, according to his regime.



Fig 28 We finally saw a sign

We had spread our resources with a reasonable margin and despite the headwind, expected to reach the turn-off in good time, well before 10am. However, after 45km, there was no sign of a sign and we started to worry and look for a sign. We had eased-off slightly and were now under pressure. That sign did not show up until 50km, we only just made it. On the way, we had picked up two cans, which we wanted to use to our advantage. As

agreed, when the peleton arrived, we were resting, with cans in hand, looking very cool. They asked, how long we had been waiting, and to my mild annoyance, Rob said “We have only just arrived”. I would rather he had been more vague in his reply. He restored my faith in him, when he added with a smile “ It’s not a race, but we got here first”. At any rate, they had done very well, but left themselves short, because the deadline was 10am. As it turned out, this was not critical, because the two trucks with the others only had arrived by 10.30.



Fig 29 Painted Desert

The Painted Desert was a worthwhile detour. We had marvelous views, colours and shapes. We also had lunch, with that morning’s cyclists being given priority. During the way back to the main track, there was much cool discussion of plasma physics in the front of the vehicle, and heated discussions about other trivia in the back. I was tired and not looking forward to another 40kms that afternoon. Several riders were to be dropped along the way, including Ralph. Rob wanted to ride all the way and was imploring me to accompany him. In the end, I

acquiesced. At the junction, after arriving just before 2pm, preparations were being made. The peleton was ready to move, and I called out "Race starts in two minutes". This lighthearted joke on my part was not funny to some, however in less than a minute, they were gone. I called out "disqualified for breaking the start", but they were out of hearing range. Several minutes later we could see them, a good way off, on a crest, burning up the track against a heavy headwind.



Fig 30 " Race starts in 2 minutes"

Rob and I made heavy weather of it, that day. I, in particular, was very tired. The wind made it more difficult. We were sweating on afternoon tea, but at the designated distance, there was none. We kept going. It was then that we began plotting, initially just as a distraction from the disappointment, but the plotting gained momentum. I suggested to Rob, that I might go early, tomorrow, on the last leg, to win the big one, although it was not a race. Rob thought that the peleton may anticipate such a move on my part, at say 5am. It would then screw me by leaving at 4am, therefore, I must leave at 3am. Better still at 2am, better still to be safe rather than sorry, don't go to bed at all and slip away quietly after dinner. We shrieked with laughter and painted further such mad scenarios. The distance



Fig 31 Dead tired

passed more easily while we joked and horsed around and so were able to cope. After a while, we managed to pick up Ralph. At one stage we were all spread out on the road, flat on our backs, the three of us, dead tired and resting. Just when we had written off afternoon tea, there was Peter, on the side of the road. We were livid, but moreso when he told us, that there were another 8km or more to camp, when it was almost dark. I was speechless.



Fig 32 Outback windmill in the strong headwind

It meant, that we would ride 118km that day. I could not believe that we would make it. Warily we set out again. It was almost dusk and Rob fell in some ruts, which I had avoided. Then we could see the campfire, back from the road. I just dropped my bike near the front truck and sat down at the fire. BT had made a fabulous dessert again, a jam roly poly, in the camp oven. There were some speeches which I have forgotten, but I waited for Rob to let loose, in the Green Cap conferring ceremony, but he had calmed down and I was too tired. I was in plan mode, did not change, borrowed Peter's fine torch and withdrew to my designated tent, kindly erected for Rob by Charlie. He however declined, preferring a swag. I did not wish to attract attention to myself, so quietly I rationalised my gear in the tent, in case I chose to go early. Only the barest essential survived. I packed 3 staminade bottles, 2 tubes, repair kit, pump, including one tyre lever and one spoon, 2 candy bars, in my haste I could not find the others, 12 speed tablets. I wore what I wore, my normal bicycle gear plus my thin windcheater. The front basket

was removed, with camera. Everything was then packed into my large red bag, which I dumped into the luggage trailer. I then took a swag and positioned myself near my bike. I located Rob in his swag and told him that if conditions were favorable and I felt good, I would do a bolter, in which case could he roll-up my swag. I returned to my swag and tried to go to sleep, however I realized that in my haste, I had packed my sleeping bag. I was slowly freezing, started to chatter and shiver.

Day 11 The Big One

Sleep was almost impossible, the next hours would be very bleak. I must have drifted in and out of sleep for several hours. Each time I looked out it was either blowing or overcast. I did not feel very comfortable. I was totally cold. At one stage I was able to read my watch/heart monitor etc and it was 3am. I did not feel like going into the cold dark night all alone. Sometime later I must have woken and needed a leak. I was desperately trying to postpone it. Finally, I resolved that should I be forced to leave the shelter of the swag, I would bite the bullet and bolt. I just had to go, therefore summoning all my courage, I quietly unzipped the swag and emerged, put on my helmet, bag and lifted up my bike, tip-toed the 40 or so metres to the road. As I neared the road, I heard a voice, so I shouted "Where's that blasted shovel?" as if I were going for a short walk. I walked quietly another 50 metres, then started the long ride, slowly at first, for the big one, in almost total darkness.

I was in a completely new world, in which I could hardly perceive horizons, nor discern shapes. I felt alone and not alone. Visibility was about 10 metres, I steered mainly by the sound of tyres on soft gravel. It was dark and intimidating. My mind started to play games to keep the demons at bay and I must have won because I warmed to the task and gained in confidence. I remembered stories of close encounters in the outback and had visions of flying saucers. My eyes played tricks on me, making me see red lights ahead, as if Eddie had himself bolted and was ahead. Then I saw lights behind me, as if they were coming after me. I stopped looking. Instead, I looked at the heavens for comfort, hoping that I would see a shooting star and therefore make a wish. I do not know what made me do it, to leave the security, albeit cold security, of the swag and the camp. Then there seemed to be road works and the road took a turn to the right. I hoped that I had not taken a wrong turn and would end up somewhere near the main highway to Alice and the joke would be on me. I took comfort in knowing that the moon would soon rise, but when it eventually did, it made little difference. The slight crescent almost made a shadow to comfort me. In vain did I scan the horizon for any sign of light, indicating a settlement. Then I remembered Rod's lessons on astronomy. I searched for the Southern Cross and made the projections. Yes, I was indeed heading due south. What a relief! Just as well that I was attentive in class.

During the ride in darkness I could use neither my watch nor my bicycle computer. I was therefore without vital information about my progress. I was flying blind and could not use my instruments. To avoid total disappointment, I picked 20km as the distance travelled that I would be happy with at first light. I was over the moon, when I finally saw a sign – it was round and on it were the letters CP and below them 60. Wow, I had traveled 30km in darkness, in about 2 hours. I now hit the pedals in earnest. 60km is only

from Penrith to Mosman, that's not too far. I've done it in three and a half hours, on my roadbike. But this was the outback. Between 7 & 8am, it started to blow. That was a huge blow, but I kept going, speed falling to just over 12 kmph, having only the high range at my disposal. Then I saw the next sign: CP 50. I continued. But my bum started to hurt badly. Stops became more frequent but I was now counting down. A vehicle passed me. I could hear another, flagged it down and asked the driver "Are there any other cyclists on the road?" He said, yes, but not to worry, because they were so far back, that I would have enough time to reach Coober Pedy and return to this spot before they showed. This was a huge relief. Then suddenly, I thought he might have been tricking me. 20 km to go. I pushed harder. I could see huge mullock heaps in the distance. The road was very smooth and the land flat as a pancake, normally ideal conditions for making good time,



Fig 31 The dangers of outback cycling

but the wind spoilt the party. Slowly, so slowly the kilometers went by. Then it was only 10 to CP. Surely they would not catch me now, I looked back and thought I could see them, but kept going. I was resigned to being pipped at the post. It's my eyes, they are playing tricks on me again. Those last 10 km must have been the longest ever. I could see the town and make out buildings. Over the hill and glanced back. Nothing. I continued the last kilometer, soon passing the council boundary, and signs alerting to the dangers of hidden shafts. Past the camping ground and right into the main street now, up the hill, past the hotels and shops, up to the main CBD. I've done it.

A huge effort. Elation filled me.

I saw the Temptations restaurant on the right promising breakfast of bacon and eggs. I took the gypsy woman under my arm and walked up the steps to the tables on the terrace, where I sat down and ordered a mug of latte and bacon, eggs, toast and tomato. Then I walked casually across the road to the supermarket and bought some deodorant, because I



Fig 32 The restaurant with view over the main street

must have smelt terrible. At 11am I was eating bacon and eggs on the terrace, overlooking the main street in Coober Pedy. After that huge meal I ordered another, looking north down the street. I then indulged in an apple strudel with cream and a hot chocolate. I did not mind the lack of reception. I was just so happy to be there. I was in a very good mood. I felt wonderful. The first of the peleton did not arrive until about 3pm. I stood at the hotel, watching

.Only Paul came to me, shook me by the hand and whispered "Congratulations".

Epilogue

After this huge breakfast, I thought about more mundane things, such as accommodation. I had one peek at the hotel that Ralph had booked for us, and said no. Fear of enclosed spaces is something that has follows me around all my life. I therefore cycled to the camping ground and rented myself a nice cabin with ensuite, but I still needed clothes.

This was before 12. After making some enquiries, I cycled to the 2nd hand shop down the road and bought a pair of jeans, a pair of laces for a belt and a shirt that made me look as if were wearing a dinner suit. I bought the lot for \$16 and headed for a shower in the cabin. Subsequently, I washed all my clothes twice. Then I cycled up to the pub and happened to see BT in her truck, or she spotted me. We agreed to celebrate with a beer that evening at pre-dinner drinks in the pub.

At dinner that night, I think we were all excited finally to be in Coober Pedy. I was on a high, having won the big one, although it wasn't a race. There were many speeches and many stories. The food, paid for by Ralph, was excellent. I was at a table with the professors, Christine and Rod. There were also Peter, Rob, Lucy and others, the peleton was at the next table, but I managed to speak to Eddie, who seemed to recognise my daring and achievement, when he said that he would have joined me, had he known, and I took that as a compliment. Ralph made a speech, in which he paid tribute to me in persisting despite my bad back. He added that thanks to me, he now had a good idea what extra controls to put in place for future rides. I had to tell and retell my story and Rob was absolutely thrilled that our little plot had succeeded. He said that, after I spoke to him the night before and said our goodbyes, he was sure that I would go. But did he know I would be cycling blind? In my mind, I had not been certain at all. To this day, I do not know what made me do it. In fact, I think that if I had been comfortable in my swag, there could have been a different ending to the story. In the final analysis, well done everybody. For my part, I was very happy in completing the ride, during which I had lost more than 5kgs. That's about \$400 per kilo. It had been a most excellent adventure. In the meantime, watch this space, because I have signed-up for the September tour.



Fig 33 BT and Christine celebrating

he would have joined me, had he known, and I took that as a compliment. Ralph made a speech, in which he paid tribute to me in persisting despite my bad back. He added that thanks to me, he now had a good idea what extra controls to put in place for future rides. I had to tell and retell my story and Rob was absolutely thrilled that our little plot had succeeded. He said that, after I spoke to

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Fig 34 This is what I must have looked like on the last day

