



By Felicity Moore

'CAN ANYONE HEAR ME? WE'RE IN TROUBLE'

When a couple and their four kids became stranded halfway across the Simpson Desert, their nightmare was only just beginning...

Skye Shelton could just make out the dingo's silhouette against the darkening sky at the top of a Simpson Desert sand dune. She could see another one a bit further along. They were both thin and mangy. She knew a third one, fatter and healthier-looking, would be nearby. Skye shivered and pulled her jacket tighter – the temperature was dropping fast, and based on the past two nights stranded in the desert she knew the mercury would likely sink to near zero.

Quietly, the young mum got up from her seat near the small fire and went to the camper trailer to check on her children. She counted four sleeping heads and was comforted by their deep breathing. Her identical twins, Cooper and Oliver, aged five, were in sleeping bags on the stretchers near the door while her two older boys, Seth, 14, and Cory, 12, were towards the back.

She returned to the campfire where her husband, Steve, and two good Samaritan travellers who'd stopped to help, Rick Shea and Hazel Sleep, were all sitting in a tight circle. Dingoes are shy and rarely attack people. But for Skye, who was watching them come closer every night, circling the camp, they felt increasingly bold. Her family had been stuck in the desert for three days now, with limited means of communications, low food supplies and crucially, as of that Sunday evening, only 10 litres of water. The nearest help was about two days' drive away. At that moment, in the eerie silence and bitter cold of the inky night in the middle of nowhere, Skye wondered if help would ever arrive.

As they waited and hoped, their experience brought into sharp focus questions about remote outback travel. If you head into one of the driest, most rugged environments in the world, you have to accept the risks and plan for the worst. The Sheltons thought they'd done just that. But if you still run into trouble, who will rescue you?

The Simpson Desert covers 175,000 sq km and contains more than 1100 long, parallel sand dunes running roughly north to south. It's an unforgiving landscape. In 2008, the South Australian government closed the desert to tourists from December to March following a number of deaths and near misses. The Outback is a dangerous place for the unprepared and unlucky: a few weeks ago the bodies of four people, including two boys aged three and 12, were found near their broken-down vehicle north of Alice Springs. In remote WA in the past month, two solo travellers have succumbed to exposure and dehydration.

The Simpson Desert is bookended at one end by the Mt Dare Hotel in South Australia, and at the other by the tiny community of Birdsville, Queensland. Between them is 477km of sandy terrain that lures thousands of four-wheel-driving enthusiasts each year.

Towards the tail end of the tourist season, on Wednesday, September 5, the Sheltons – mum Skye, 34, dad Steve, 35, and their four kids left the Mt Dare Hotel to drive through the desert on the final leg of their four-week holiday. So far, their trip had taken them from their home at Ripley, near Ipswich, to Mount Isa, Darwin, Daly Waters, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Uluru. After crossing the Simpson to Birdsville, they planned to head home.

The Sheltons knew the desert driving would be slow going. The Mt Dare Hotel to Birdsville leg seems like it could be done in a day but there's no bitumen road cleaving the sand dunes. A good day's progress is about 100km, with a top speed of about 20km/h. Towing a camper trailer, as the Sheltons were, slows things to about 12km/h. And desert driving is brutal on vehicles. Fine red sand can block air filters and choke engines; suspensions can be wrecked and tyres destroyed.

When the Sheltons left the Mt Dare Hotel they had enough food and water for the four-day crossing to Birdsville, planning to arrive late Saturday or early Sunday. Temperatures had been warm, and a couple of 35-degree days were on the way. Their 1998 Nissan Patrol GU had been running well and they'd already covered more than 9000km on this trip, largely without incident. "It was virtually a brand-new engine, with only 40,000km on it," says Steve, a

boilermaker and car enthusiast. On the Friday they were tackling the sand dunes by 7am, making a beeline towards Birdsville, when it became clear they had a problem. "The engine would rev really high," Skye says. "And it would just turn off," Steve continues. "If you held it at really high revs we made it over, like, four dunes max. But it was going to blow the engine up."

With a couple of days of desert driving still ahead of them, fear set in. They decided to push the car as far as they could. Finally, at the crest of a dune, the vehicle stalled and wouldn't start again. The Sheltons were alone, about 270km west of Birdsville, on the French Line – the most direct route – in the middle of nowhere, with no means of getting out and only a UHF line-of-sight radio capable of communicating a few kilometres at most in this undulating terrain.

For a few moments after the engine sputtered to a stop, everyone in the car fell silent. Steve got out to inspect the engine. Skye reached for the radio, her anxiety rising as she sent out desperate pleas to any nearby travellers over the airwaves for the next hour or so. "I'm on the radio, 'Can anyone hear me, we're in trouble'. And then nothing. And then again. And nothing. I was panicking like crazy," she says. Eventually, a response. "We heard Rick's voice and I started crying. He was like an angel, he said, 'Yes, I can hear you,'" Skye smiles.

About 20 minutes later, Rick Shea and Hazel Sleep appeared over the crest of the dune in their 2008 Nissan Patrol. Rick [the writer's father] and his partner Hazel were on their way back to Rockhampton after driving the famed Canning Stock Route in Western Australia. On that trip the aerial on their long range HF radio, which was capable of communicating over thousands

Middle of nowhere:
a drone's view of the
breakdown site

of kilometres, had been damaged, so he'd fashioned a temporary one. "At the time, it wasn't a huge deal. We'd been travelling with friends and we'd all been using [the short-range] UHF. We could sort of communicate using the [temporary HF] radio but it would need to be repaired once we got home," he says.

Rick and Steve looked at the broken engine and could see fairly quickly it was beyond their abilities to fix. "So, we called [using the HF radio] the Birdsville Roadhouse to request a recovery, but when we gave our GPS location Birdsville told us we were closer to Mt Dare and referred us to them," Rick says.

Rick contacted the Mt Dare Hotel, which also runs a recovery service, but the static from the damaged aerial made communications difficult and voices were barely audible. Finally they managed to convey the essential details. The adults crowded around the radio, straining their ears, and eventually the words "truck", "coming", and "Sunday" made it back through the staticky void. Today was Friday.

Relief, followed by fear, bubbled up at the news. The Sheltons had left Mt Dare with enough supplies to last the four-day crossing, and plenty of water in reserve in case of emergencies. But their large aluminium container stored underneath the trailer had burst on the rough roads and 110 litres of water had poured onto the red sand. They still had about 84 litres in the car that, with careful rationing of around three litres a

person a day, would last the family until Sunday. Rick and Hazel had around 60 litres in their vehicle. If the truck wasn't arriving until Sunday they would all have to stretch their supplies an additional two days for the journey out of the desert. Skye was worried.

The stranded family and their two companions needed better communications with the outside world in order to convey how low their provisions were and to ask the recovery truck to bring additional supplies to get them through the two-day journey to Birdsville. Their options were limited. Either Rick and Hazel would have to leave, possibly going back to Mt Dare to coordinate the recovery, or they would all have to sit tight and wait for a passing motorist with water to spare. Rick was determined to stay with the stranded group. "You can't leave someone in that predicament on their own," he says. "Without us they had no hope. So, you know, it wasn't a hard decision to say we'll stay, we'll get them out of here, even if it meant tying them on to the roof rack and carting them out. You just couldn't go and leave them there."

The group settled in for the night, setting up camp close to the track so they wouldn't be missed by any tourists driving through. None did.

Rick, a former secretary of the HF Radio Club, one of the largest radio clubs in the country, was able to "radio telephone" the club's vice-president, Jacqui Deering, in Adelaide. "It's

one of the mysteries of long-distance radio communication," he says. "I couldn't get a message through to Mt Dare, just 240km away, but I could get a better line of communication to Adelaide, some 1500km away. It wasn't all that clear either, but it allowed us to come up with the next solution." Deering called another HF radio club member in Wagga Wagga, Larry Beasley, who was able to provide the missing link in the communications chain from the stranded group in the desert to the Mt Dare Hotel. Messages were passed from the stranded group to Beasley, who would relay them to the female operator at Mt Dare. It wasn't perfect but it was better than nothing.

Once the link was established, the first message to come from Mt Dare was that they would need the name and address of the stranded family, their phone number and email address, the make and model of their vehicle, and their credit card details before a recovery truck could be sent out. Mt Dare wanted an initial payment of \$5000 before beginning the recovery. Whether it was due to the poor quality of the radio reception, or the messages simply getting garbled along the way, the Sheltons claim they were unaware that \$5000 was required up-front. "We thought they wanted to know this stuff so they could send us the bill," Steve says. "We got the message, 'The credit card has been declined. What are you going to do?' Not, 'We're still coming' but 'What are you going to do?'" Steve says.

Suddenly their rescue was in doubt. For a family stranded in the desert, the idea that rescuers would only come once a significant sum of money was paid – money that was not readily available – was devastating. The problem highlights the reality of life on the edge of the desert. The Mt Dare recovery service is not free and providing it is an expensive business. Birdsville police officer Senior Constable Stephan Pursell says about 10,000 to 15,000 tourists cross the desert every tourist season and the number of breakdowns is high. "You would probably have no idea how many times [the recovery vehicles] would go back and forwards. The breakdown service, whether they're doing repairs out there or putting them on trucks [to tow back to the workshop]. It's a regular occurrence," he says.

Mt Dare Hotel owner and operator Graham Scott says they conduct about 20 to 25 recoveries a season, adding that the bill for recovery varies according to the complexity of the job. "We're seeing more and more camper trailers coming through the desert. That means if they're towing



a camper trailer we have to take two trucks out there to bring them back, and that can put the cost into the thousands," he explains.

Chris Le Page, who operates the Kulgera Roadhouse and a similar recovery service west of Mt Dare, confirms the difficulties of operating such a service. "Driving through the desert is really hard on your vehicles. Your suspension, your tyres, your engine," he says. "There's a high cost to living out here that people generally don't understand."

Out in the desert, with a declined credit card and four children, Steve and Skye turned to their parents, hoping that between them they could cobble the money together. "I got a message to my parents that we needed help," Steve says. "We eventually received a message late that day that they could pay \$3000." The stranded group was optimistic the rescue would go ahead on Sunday now the upfront money had been confirmed.

Saturday passed slowly. The Sheltons erected a small gazebo to give the group of eight some shade. As the sun inched across the sky, everyone shuffled along, chasing the square of shade across the sand. "We spent the time trying to keep the kids entertained quietly. I can't tell you how many games of noughts and crosses the kids played with Rick. Hazel got a lot of knitting done," Skye says.

Everyone was counting down the hours until the Mt Dare recovery truck's expected arrival on Sunday afternoon. But on Saturday afternoon Larry Beasley radioed with more bad news. "Mt Dare advised me they weren't going to be able to make it on Sunday. I had to tell [the stranded group] that the truck wasn't coming until Monday," Larry tells me. "Mt Dare told me they couldn't come because they were fixing a truck." The group didn't know it at the time, but in a stroke of unusually bad luck both of Mt Dare's recovery vehicles were inoperable.

By now, their supplies were getting quite low. Rick contacted his friend, former HF Radio Club president Geoff Hurst, in NSW's Hunter Valley. "I said to him that it might be time to alert the authorities that there was a situation unfolding in the desert," Rick says. "That's when he said to me, 'Larry and I have had that conversation and we're worried too, so we've already contacted the South Australian police.' We just wanted them to be aware that there was a situation out in the desert and it could become perilous. We weren't asking for rescue at that stage."

Rick radioed Larry and asked him to communicate the seriousness of the situation to Mt Dare; he felt as though they didn't understand that

supplies were getting low. At the same time, Steve's mother, Ann Shelton, was calling Mt Dare to inquire about her family, speaking to a woman who had been communicating with the stranded travellers. Ann says she received an unsympathetic response in an exchange that left her shaken. "That night I was sitting up at 3.30 in the morning just sobbing my heart out, knowing the little ones were out in the desert," she says, still haunted by the memory.

Meanwhile, back on the French Line, Rick's concerns grew. Sunday passed as slowly as Saturday. Flies swarmed the encampment and the adults struggled to keep the children distracted. "We'd been in the desert for two days and hadn't seen a single passing vehicle," Rick says.

In fact, they wouldn't see another soul on the French Line until Monday – three days after breaking down – when Mt Dare sent provisions and a satellite phone out with some travelling New Zealanders. "We were so happy to see them come over the hill," Skye says. "I think the kids saw them first and they called out, 'Look, here they are!'" But euphoria quickly turned to disappointment. The Kiwis had brought just four litres of water for the eight people in the desert, along with two loaves of bread, one packet of cornflakes, one packet of sausages and two tins of baked beans. Senior Constable Pursell says it's recommended that people take six to seven litres of water per person per day into the desert.

Chris Le Page, from the Kulgera Roadhouse,

confirms he and his team had been trying to source parts for the Mt Dare recovery trucks. "It was really unfortunate and a bad bit of luck that both of [Mt Dare's] trucks were out of commission," he says, revealing that one had been hit at speed by another vehicle and the other needed a replacement part. "In the end, we couldn't get their trucks running but we were able to send two mechanics to help out," he says.

It is a day's drive from Kulgera to Mt Dare and at least another two days' drive from Mt Dare to the breakdown point. The mechanics were expected to arrive on Tuesday, according to the Kiwi travellers. "Finally, we had some real information and some positive news," Skye says. The group was hopeful that their desert nightmare would soon come to an end.

Radio operators Larry Beasley and Geoff Hurst had contacted the South Australian police twice, conscious that the situation could turn in a heartbeat. Senior Constable Pursell confirms that he received a call from the Port Augusta police asking for an update on the situation. "I called Mt Dare and spoke to them, and I was confident the situation was in hand. They were sending food and water and a sat phone out to the group," he says.

The much-needed satellite phone ensured the group could now get clear messages to their rescuers. Skye and Steve called their parents to let them know they were OK, and that a rescue was hopefully happening the next day.

Safe: Steve and Skye Shelton with their kids



Day five in the desert, Tuesday, late afternoon:

over the crest of the next dune, two Nissan Patrols appeared driven by the mechanics Graeme and Tony, from Kulgera. "G'day," they both said. It was a euphoric moment for the group; 120 litres of water was unloaded and the pair immediately got to work on the engine.

"These mechanics are highly skilled and highly trained," Chris Le Page, their boss, says. "One of them has worked in the Antarctic. They're not [the types] who need a computer and a diagnostic machine to tell them what's wrong, these guys are problem-solvers," he says. Such expertise doesn't come cheap. The bill for recovering the Sheltons exceeded \$10,000. The two mechanics, in two trucks, were away from home for a week and a half. On the way to the breakdown, one of their trucks suffered a broken shock absorber, a shredded tyre, steering column problems and damage to the fuel tank.

It took the mechanics about four hours to find the problem in the Sheltons' vehicle: a sensor in the timing mechanism was broken. They fashioned a replacement and hammered it into place. "When I sat in the driver's seat and turned the key, I was pretty nervous," Steve admits. Everybody held their breath. The engine caught and roared to life. Everybody cheered.

The sun was setting on day five and another group had passed through earlier that day, sharing water and a few beers around the campfire as everyone toasted the rescuers. The two mechanics, the four New Zealanders and the two grey nomads all shared the Sheltons' final night on the French Line. The six had grown to 14 people.

On Wednesday, they packed up and began the two-day journey to Birdsville, travelling in convoy. The mechanics stayed with the group for 50km or so to ensure the vehicle was running smoothly before peeling off and turning back towards Kulgera. The Sheltons, along with Rick and Hazel, rolled into Birdsville late on Thursday, September 13, almost a week after breaking down.

Since their perilous experience in the desert, the Sheltons have been labelled irresponsible by the operator of the Mt Dare Hotel. "They should never have been out there," Graham Scott says bluntly. He argues they were under-prepared, with insufficient supplies and no contingency plan in case anything went wrong.

The Sheltons counter that they are experi-



Waiting game: at camp in the desert

enced four-wheel drivers, with thousands of kilometres under their belt. They researched the track and the conditions. Steve has rebuilt his own V8 engine in the shed at home and is very capable with engines. They left Mt Dare with plenty of provisions and had taken advice that a UHF radio was sufficient to communicate with other travellers who were sure to be on the same route.

Rick confirms the family did everything right, although he agrees with Scott and Senior Constable Pursell that they should have had a satellite phone or an HF radio. "The issue is that the recovery kept getting prolonged," Rick says. "They had enough water to last them until Sunday, but when the rescuers said Sunday, then Monday, then Tuesday, well, it understandably became a very tense, very fraught situation. Mt Dare should have immediately advised us that they couldn't carry out a recovery." Knowing that both Mt Dare's recovery trucks were out of commission would have freed the group to seek a new solution.

Graham Scott, who was away from the hotel until the Sunday, won't explain why the group was told help was coming on Sunday, then Monday, then Tuesday, other than to say "everyone did their best". He also believes that if you can't fund a recovery you have no business going into the desert, saying he's never rescued someone from the desert without payment first. "Well, put it this way, we've always got payment [up front]. If they don't have enough money for a recovery they shouldn't go out there," he says.

Kulgera Roadhouse owner Chris Le Page and Birdsville Roadhouse owner Peter Barnes say they operate a little differently; they will rescue people

first before presenting them with the bill. When asked what would happen if someone couldn't pay for their recovery, Senior Constable Pursell says the police or emergency services would go. "But we would only be getting the people, not the vehicles," he adds. "Nobody would be left out there; that would never happen."

Since the tragedy of the young family who perished north of Alice Springs earlier this month, he agrees that satellite phones should be mandatory for anyone who travels in the desert. "I would say yes, from my point of view. It's something we've been talking about in recent times, following the recent tragedies on the other side of Alice Springs," he says. "With a satellite phone you can communicate." Without one, you can't.

The Birdsville Roadhouse is on the market. Barnes has been recovering people from the desert since 1985 and he admits he's now getting too old and refers a lot of the recoveries to Mt Dare. It is possible the roadhouse will be sold to someone who does not want to run a recovery service. It's hard to think of any other area of Australian life where private enterprise provides such a vital service.

Senior Constable Pursell won't entertain the notion that the Birdsville recovery service won't always be there. "It's just not possible. We absolutely need that service," he says. "I don't know what would happen, but it must continue." But if it's such a vital service, is it too important to leave in the hands of private business? Should government regulate the commercial nature of saving people in the desert?

With more than 15,000 tourists expected to traverse the French Line next year, breakdowns will continue to happen. How many of those people will have \$10,000 at their disposal? "From an education point of view it would be good if people were aware of the risks and were properly prepared," Pursell says. He says those preparations include taking a satellite phone and an emergency radio beacon, packing enough food and water for double the length of time you expect to be travelling, and notifying family members of your expected arrival date. And, of course, the resources to fund a recovery in a worst-case scenario.

Back in the living room at home, a week after their return, Skye's brow furrows. "I woke up the other night and needed to go to the toilet. But I didn't want to get out of bed because I was afraid the dingoes would get me." Steve squeezes her shoulder. Skye wipes away tears, still haunted by the traumatic week in the desert that could so easily have turned into tragedy. ●