



Day 0 to minus 100



The car gets organised as do we....at last the planning was finished, and we and the boys (Dale and Peter) were ready to “do the Simpson” as part of the Simpson Desert Bike Challenge, for us it was in our car – for them, on bikes....their job was to ride the desert, ours was to help them do it from carrying water to making sure that shade was up and running. 2300ks between Canberra and the race start meant that we needed to travel a fair way before it became serious...our route to the start was across the Hay Plains into South Australia before turning north towards Maree and the Oodnadatta Track. We followed the track until Oodnadatta before turning right into even more desolate country. The race starts on Tuesday 1 October and runs for 5 days – we were keen to get Dale used to the heat as soon as possible.

The Simpson Desert Bike Challenge is in part a personal challenge for the bike riders, and also a fund raising charity event for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, where between the riders raising money, adhoc fines and the last night auction, good money is raised for the RFDS. Pete from ARB Fyshwick, Jo and myself are out to support the boys in their efforts and the RFDS itself.

#### Day 1 - Wednesday

Left home at 1.15. Picked Jo up from school at 1.45 and off to pick up Dale.

Narrandera for the night, we had dinner in the local club bistro. Stopped about 5.45pm and the fuel consumption about 12 litres per 100 k's for the day.

#### Day 2

Left Narrandera at 6.40am into head winds across the Hay plains. Winds are so strong that the car changes down gears and the fuel consumption has dropped to nearly 14.5 litres per 100k. The weather reports are that the winds are 60+ ks an hour. Went through Waddi at 7.14, Hay at 8.25 and Balranald at 9.40. We tried to stop for a coffee break in a rest area but the wind made it impossible, so we did a driver change and pushed on.



The obligatory selfie....

We rolled into Mildura at 11.10, filled up (108 litres / 800 kilometres on the tank) and also had a coffee and loo break.

12.52pm became 12.22pm as we crossed the border into South Australia. We had been passed by a Hilux ute loaded to the hilt from Canberra only to pull up behind them at the fruit exclusion stop. They unloaded fruit from bags, Tupperware containers and the fridge -- it was a fun 10 or so minutes waiting for that to finish up as the car occupants were obviously not happy losing their vegies. When it was our turn, we declared that we didn't have anything, they asked to check the fridge and then we were on way...



Lunch was at Remark in a Rotary Park J & J had salad while Dale had a pastie and bun!

After lunch we pushed on, ended up at Hawker for the night. It was still cool and thankfully the van park had an enclosed camp kitchen. While that helped it was a cool night and morning. The mileage today was about 1050 kms, and thankfully the wind stopped mid afternoon which made the last few hours into Hawker that much easier.

Day 3.

We filled up the car in Hawker (Diesel \$1.76/L) and set off up the SA coal fields and started to past the historical towns and sidings that were supported by the original Ghan train.

Mornos was at Farina (Farina, Latin word for flour), an old town that stopped surviving in the 1980's. It was established as part of



Breakfast at Hawker

SA's push to grow wheat before giving up and going back to grazing. It existed for around a 100 years before giving. These days like many of the historical towns on this run, historical groups are trying to keep the history alive. Its possible to see the outline of the streets and good detail of the buildings that once existed.



Farina Ruins

We paused and checked out the Curdimurka Siding which is largely restored these days. There is bush ball ball there every second year as a fund raiser for charity.



Curdimuka Siding

Lunch was at an old Ghan siding next to a water hole, and afternoon smoko was at Albeuckina Bridge – its claim to fame was and still is SA's longest bridge at 560 metres long. It was built in the 1880's by 360 blokes – fair effort that, now days we need a PM and 15 managers just to start.....



The temperature was starting rise, and dash started to show 35 degrees at times – at last we are warm!

We made it to Oodnadatta and checked in to the Pink Roadhouse caravan park around 5.30 or so. Those who know about the roadhouse would know that the bloke who ran and was the road house identity, was killed last year in a accident, the wife has since sold up for \$15k.... After setting up (read that as parking the car and undoing 4 latches) we decided to head for the pub for a cold one. Dale did the first shout and Jo had a lime and soda in a 10oz beer glass, Dale had a Coopers

and I asked for cider over ice, it also came in a 10oz glass. If that wasn't bad enough, when I did the shout the barman asked for glasses back, they were running low on glassware.

## Day 4

After attempting to catch up on the last minute washing, we filled up at the roadhouse (2.26 per litre) before taking off to Dalhousie Springs, passing a few more old train stops along way (apparently during the war there were around 60 trains a week going that way).

We also took a good look the ruins of Dalhousie Homestead as well – it was attempt to grow date palms and Lucerne, they also had sheep and cattle on the station as well. They were a tough lot back then.....

We got into Dalhousie Springs around lunch time and spent the rest of the day lounging around and fighting the flies, we had found the ole fly net over the head trick was only way to beat the buggers. A few dips in the springs in the arvo was the only way to go, the best was the after dinner that day with a dip just before bed. Next to our camp site some rider Ron and his support crew arrived and set up. It was good for Dale to talk to others about what lay ahead.



## Day 5, at Dalhousie Springs

Not a lot to report, mostly it was about more riders and crews coming in with Dale and the boys next door (rider Ron and his support team) checking them all out, when I asked who was at the best odds, all I got was that they are all odd....

We spoke to some of the fellas around and found out how the race operates with some good tips, and also heard that last year's fund raising effort was around \$36k – we are hoping to beat that this year.

As I said, not a lot to report just the odd dip in the springs – and I suppose I should mention the car that pulled into the campsite over the road from us, 1 bloke, 3 girls and no change room....pity that Dale and the boys from next door were out cruising elsewhere. We did hear late in day that Pete and Pete were out at Purnie Bore waiting for us.. Tomorrow morning we're off to Purnie Bore, and the real fun begins.



A tough Day at the Springs



## Day 6, Purnie Bore

Dale, Jo and I start the day as we often do, a cup of coffee followed by a dip in the springs then breakfast of bacon and eggs (it's all true!).

We set off to Purnie at around 8 and caught up the boys at the bore around 9.30. After 2270.7 km's from our front door we are here at the race start place. Most of the day is spent doing last minute stuff for the boys, registration and working out our support game plan for the lads. Dale went for a 20k ride – it was 40 degrees and windy for most of the day. I dropped the tyres down to 16psi in the front and 18 in the back.

### Unloading Dale's bike from ARB Pete's ute

support people arrive into the bore for registration, briefing and generally checking each other out. For the bikies, there was more than a passing interest in who had fat wheels, skinny wheels, light weight frames, who had the latest free flowing helmets with anti magpie attachments...for others we watched the official and supporters vehicles roll in – Landcruisers, Patrols, Discoverys, Navaras with the odd Hilux, even a Amarok and Tourag as well.

The riders were an eclectic lot but they all had a support car with friends and family involved

Everybody showed up to the evening briefing except the Race Director who was experiencing tyre troubles on his Range Rover, the word is that he was heading to Alice Springs to get new ones. We later heard that he was waiting in Coober Pedy for the week for tyres to come to him before he could move. The briefing reminded the riders of type of injuries they may get, drink plenty, rest well, and lastly that they needed to average 12.5 kph during race times across the 570km and 600 or so sand dunes.



With a 4.30 start – people went to bed early....Jo and I look forward to crossing the desert

## Day 7 Race Day.....

Everyone was rudely awoken at 1.30 am. We had a smattering of rain and one very good sandstorm, not many slept well that night – in part because of race day nerves and part (probably mostly) due to the dust storm that came through with very strong winds. Our camper didn't notice the wind, but we certainly noticed the sand in the camper afterwards.....

With everyone up the routine becomes....routine. The first convey sets out with 5 Doctors, 3 water carriers, track markers and lunch time tucker to see the riders through the arvo. Pete from ARB goes out in the first convoy at 5.30 with the race due to start at 6. Jo and I will be the second convoy to pick up the pieces so to speak.



### Day 1 Convoy 1

At 6 the race is on – our fella's have been as nervous as anything, but they have trained hard back in Canberra, Sydney and everywhere else. Jo and I leave in the second convey at 7am to catch them at lunch – they looked knackered but were exceptionally pleased to have

got through stage one – 80ks across the Simpson Desert, the afternoon will be 50 ks (the pattern of 80/50 is repeated every day). ARB Pete leaves at lunchtime to set up our camp for the evening while we follow as part of the sweep process to pick them up (if a rider cannot stick to time then they are “swept” up and given a ride. This challenge is about completing as much as you can, not how fast....).



Lined up and nervous at the start line

Anyway, we got them going again, sort of expecting to pick them up – they made it to the end of day 1, not bad for a couple of old blokes from Canberra. Time to mention the field – mostly young people who look the goods but there is also a lass from New Zealand (the only female competitor) and a bloke who was back again, his age? Lou is only 74 and he is thinking of a new bike!

Fantastic result-our boys completed day 1.

At the lunch and evening breaks, it's our job to fill the 4 water packs and put 3 of them into the water stop boxes (these are named and the riders also start the stage with a pack), help

them with their tucker. We also organise the evening shower. ARB Pete gets the swags organised and the camp ready for them in the evening, and in the morning we all help to pack up the swags and breakfast stuff so that ARB Pete is ready for the 5.30 departure while the boys are weighed and get ready for 6am – it includes an application of cream in places that don't get mentioned. ARB Pete, Jo and I leave that for them to do

## Day 8 Race day 2

No wind last night but very cool and our lads are not deterred. After breakfast and packing up ARB Pete was off at 5.30 to go the 80k's to the lunch spot. Day 2 is the supposedly the hardest, with the afternoon session set to sort out the players or not. We travelled in the second convoy as usual but didn't pick our boys up at all, in fact they looked pretty good at lunch time with good food and rest – they had been pacing themselves well.

As for the desert, the dunes were becoming more frequent, however the cars were travelling easy while the riders reckon it was now getting harder. We passed

the Lone Gum Tree

where the Snowy the tail end Charlie offered to get changed into his pink tutu for \$10 a car – everybody paid up.



The afternoon session promised to be harder and so it was for a few riders – by the end of the stage 18 of the 23 day one starters had completed all stages within allotted time. Our boys were at 100 percent for the 2 days and we are wrapped with their efforts. After a shower, dinner they gave the dancing girls and show a miss and went to bed – tomorrow will be another hot and treading day for them.



Morning - Day 2



Jo and I had been having trouble with fridges not coping with the heat and it wasn't till they stopped totally that I looked hard at the problem – the terminal had come loose from the battery so there goes the power for the fridge! Anyway, at the lunch break I fixed it and all was good again.

We continued on in the second convoy and enjoyed the scenery while also watching a few riders going slow and then stopping. These guys were picked up, but again, not our boys.

When Jo and I were distributing the afternoon packs, we mixed them up a bit....so that Pete had 2 at one stop and Dale 2 at the other. Apparently it caused a bit of entertainment at the water stops. The good news – it wasn't mentioned at the evening briefing fine session.

### Day 9 Race Day 3



The weather overnight was cool again but this there was wind that cropped up early and it stayed blowing all day. The first leg of the day was over some decent sized dunes that would test the riders and cars – not extreme by any standard but a good start. After the first lot of dunes the clay pans took over which would have been great for the riders except for the headwind that came across the flats – these knocked the riders around a fair bit and so the second convoy caught up pretty quickly to the last of the riders. We stayed back but clearly they were struggling into the wind, and comments from Dale showed it was getting tougher.

At first we were the 5<sup>th</sup> car in the convoy of about 15 – the rest of the cars had gone in the first convoy and would be, as usual at the lunch spot. The dunes were getting bigger and more difficult – the map says the average height of the dunes here is 22 metres high, and most had sharp drops and turns right at the top. Because of the speed of the 2<sup>nd</sup> group, occasionally the Sweep and first car would go ahead while we waited for a bit longer. In one of the moments, and on top of a biggie the new lead car, an 80 series Landcruiser became bogged. After a bunch of us went to help him, I took the Maxtrax off the roof of our car and went and got him going again. In all we used the Maxtrax on 5 or 6 cars, interestingly enough most were Landcruisers – an 60 Series, 100 Series and a 200 Series....



Lunch on the clay pan

We made it to lunch and caught up with the lads and as I said earlier, they were tired but the track had turned north after getting onto the K1 Line, and the wind was now behind. The leader of the riders, Ron did the 80 ks in under 4 hours.

The afternoon session saw us heading north again towards Poepell's corner (NT, SA and QLD's corner post) a lot flat running along the edges of salt pans and in between the dunes rather than across them.

The session had a following wind and all the riders made it through, Ron the leader covered the 50 kilometres in

less than 1 hour 40 minutes. Our ute is doing well, because of the convoys has done plenty of idling along and has carried its load well, so far and since Oodnadatta, its averaging around 14 litres per 100 – not bad to date (and it has been just over 600ks).





The boys caught up with some maintenance and puncture repairs – the punctures are easily solved when they pull the burrs out – the sealant inside then plugs the hole and all is good.

This evening's session included an update on how all competitors are going time wise, Ron is still a clear leader with the boys coming in around 16<sup>th</sup>. Pete and Dale who up to now have been known as the Canberra Team took on the new identity of Bill and Ben – its not clear as to who is who though.

## Day 10 Race Day 4

At 4.30 the horn goes off to get everybody going as usual, I get the billy on and then start helping the boys with the swags, Jo tidies up the penthouse suite (which has been fantastic) then she makes the lads their hot chocolate.

The wind had dropped overnight and it was another cool one for us all – 3 degrees this morning but the warmed up to low 30's as it has done everyday day.

The campsite was a good one and the sunrise just magic as the race gets going for the last full day – 35 k's to the top of Poppell Lake then a right turn back into the dunes across the QAA line towards Birdsville.



Today's stages are slightly less than before with 70 ks in the morning and 50 in the afternoon. The boys get through stage 7 OK but the last half of this morning has knocked them around. The first half was pretty flat and fast across the salt flats but the high sand dunes has taken its toll. For the cars it was also interesting with the scallops on the dunes throwing the cars around a lot with a few cars needing to have two or three goes at getting over. It looked to us as one of the harder days was on.



The boys made it to the lunch break but they were starting to look tired.

After lunch Jo and I stayed in the afternoon convoy as usual – riders were starting to get swept or have big problems. Jo and I were starting to get worried as the dunes were getting taller, according to the maps the average height was 22 metres. To add to the worries, we were asked to pick another riders bike from the side of the track and put it onto the bike rack on our car. The rider, number 16 was considered one of the experience ones. The dunes were deteriorating rapidly as the cars (30 plus) before us worked hard up the dunes and by the time we got there.

Jo and I made it in with convoy around 5.30. We found Pete and Dale sitting down and looking flat, Pete usually is still full of energy after the days work, and Dale while looking tired will get around and do things...tonight Pete could barely move, and when I asked Dale how he was, the answer was simply "I'm shattered mate...."

That night we went to the briefing without Dale – who after a long shower and a good dinner which he struggled to eat simply said that's it, and went to bed.



At the end of the day, our boys had completed over 500km of desert riding and had completed every stage totally....

## Day 11 Race Day 5



Last night's briefing described the last day which has one race stage to complete and a 30plus k ride into Birdsville as one group. It's the last stage which has all worried, described as a 38k sprint over the last of the desert before climbing "little Red" and ending stage 9 and the race.

As it was for yesterday afternoon, following in the sweep convoy you could see it was another tough day for us and even more so the riders – there is some cruelty in having a race that finishes with 30 metre high sand dunes that the riders need to pick their bikes up to carry over. We were listening of the radio for the Sweep comments about who was in front of him and

ready to be plucked – added to that we had crossed a dune only to hear a following car had become stuck, after backing up the dune to see if a tow was needed, I got the Maxtrax off the roof of the car again to get a car moving.

A few riders were picked but so far so good – but after how Dale looked yesterday we were expecting at any time a call to come and pick the lads – thankfully it never came, the boys completed every stage all the way through.

The last dune to be crossed was little Red, and on the side was the end of the race – crossed the dunes as one of the last cars and confirmed our guys had completed the run 100%. It was also great that their families were there to welcome them after coming in from Brisbane. While all this was on, Paul and Judy our good friends from Canberra also drove up.



Ron of course won the event, the only thing left to do was the casual ride into Birdsville as a group to be welcomed by the families and supporters. The Riders came in, led by Ron and Mel (the only woman rider) followed by all the riders in a line, lastly Snowy rode in with his pink tutu on – that raised another \$500 for RFDS.



Saturday night was the dinner (great meal at the Birdsville pub) followed by presentations and the auction. In all it was a good wrap for the event – many people slept well that night....



Day 12....

Paul and Judy, Jo and I head back out to Big Red to have a go from all angles – we crossed Big Red from the east side, down the west and back up again on the ‘real track’. We went down the west side again and went down to Little Red and crossed that one from west as well before heading back to Birdsville and heading north to Bedourie. As I type up the last of this report – we are sitting in the council park at Bedourie on lush green grass, with access to the pool and artesian spa complex, hot showers, free hot and cold washing machines, free BBQ....for \$5 a head....Tomorrow off towards Boulia and probably where this report gets sent from.



## The Race...

The Desert Challenge has been raising money for over 25 and is clearly run by dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers who aren't in it for personal gain. It runs over the Simpson Desert and is only changed if the weather or road conditions make it do so

## The Riders....

Credit to them all for even thinking about – most are on “fat bikes” these days although a couple were on the more traditional mountain bikes. The fat bikes clearly make it easier for the riders.

## The fat bikes....

Called that because of the width of the wheels is 4 inches and the tyre pressures are very low for this event, around 4.5 psi cold for the sand and slightly higher for the harder stuff. Like all sports these days the bikes are getting lighter in weight and stronger in the frame. Our guys thought their bikes were too heavy.

## The Supporters....

ARB Pete with his Patrol ute carried a lot of the load, his bigger box meant that there was good space to be used – we carried plenty as well as had the extra seats (not needed in the end!) and the bike rack – we got a system going pretty early with ARB Pete so our lads could sit and be rested – other supporters had to do all parts of the gig where we could focus on bits and pieces. Having said that, I won't miss filling up 7 water bags a day a bit or rolling up swags at 4.30 in the morning, climbing up and tying them down.

For ARB Pete in the lead convoy he did a lot of idling time when the course marker was putting out signs and distance markers. For us in the second convoy it was a fairly quick first hour or so until we caught the tail enders – then was up a dune and sit for 5 or 10 minutes then up a dune again. For my ute – we used 125 litres of diesel from Oodnadatta to Birdsville, we did carry a 20 litre container of diesel as back up but we got in with 25 litres to spare – the distance was 806km. All other things that we did for the ute worked – and it passed with a 100% success on the dunes (not even 1 back up). From Dalhousie Springs, the GPS record shows that we travelled 674km at an average speed of 5kph (that is GPS on time).

Special mention to the supporters of the other riders – people who had never driven 4 wheel drives let alone in a desert, to the women who did the lot for their riders and then drove over 600 dunes – to Lou's supporter who is 8 years younger than Lou (which makes him 66) – all good.

## The Organisers....

No injuries or issues – good job, well done

## Pete and Dale

Had done an enormous amount of preparation, both for themselves and their bikes. The bikes had puncture sealant, special geared hubs and everything had a going over time and time again.

For themselves their preparation was very good – right food, right amounts and the training done to get there enough – well done fellas!

The RFDS – no news yet on the amount raised.

## Jo and John

had a ball, long days, lots of car time (at least 6 to 7 hours a day), busy when not in the car, no work topics thought about or discussed! Thanks to Pete and Brownie for asking us along, huge thanks to ARB Pete for his help throughout the event.

The last of the updates will appear on various websites [www.desertchallenge.org](http://www.desertchallenge.org) Pete and Brownie Facebook and everyday hero pages, and I will put some more photos up to our page when I can ([www.iojohn.org/photo](http://www.iojohn.org/photo))

Anyway, that's all for now, thanks reading, hopefully it all makes sense as a lot of this was written late in the day – cheers J & J

