

“Scorching Across the Simpson Desert”.
A reflection on being part of Ron Grant’s support crew for the
1985 record attempt summer crossing record of the Simpson
Desert.

It was a sultry December evening in 1984. I was lying on the lounge room floor of my house in Maryborough, Queensland. The ceiling fan was whirring away overhead. I was in a reflective mood as I contemplated my impending journey into the Simpson Desert with ultra marathoner Ron Grant.

This would be the first summer crossing of the desert by a runner. The Simpson desert is a hot, red, sandy expanse that touches the states of Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory. It consists of numerous strings of sand hills. With summer temperatures hovering around the half century mark it aptly known nicknamed the “devil’s sandpit.”

Ron Grant had sure footed dependability as an ultra-distance runner. He had acquired the required mental resoluteness through a resume of consistent achievements. In 1980 he had run the Birdsville track and the following year he had done a winter crossing of the Simpson desert breaking a record set by New South Wales solo runner Bob Beer with a time of 4 days 11 hours 45 minutes. Ron’s tour de force had been running fully around Australia in 1983 covering over 13000 kilometres, then acknowledged as the world’s longest run.

For this summer crossing challenge Ron had some good sponsors. The car dealership Sci-Fleet had provided six vehicles and other assistance. The Anita Gasteen publicity firm had managed publicity and media so that there was good public awareness of the event. It was being promoted as *The Ron Grant Sci Fleet Scorchers*.



Commemorative shirt given to crew members.

Yet despite this buzz I was in one of those moods where I was asking myself, "how did I get into this mess". In a mock discussion with myself I was questioning my sanity in embarking on this venture. My friend Ron Broom was sitting in a lounge chair sniggering as I admonished myself for my predicament.

I reflected back to March earlier that year when Ron Grant first told me of his intention to undertake the crossing. I tried to talk him out of it. "The demands on the body will be too great". Obviously, my physiological assessment of the perils didn't worry Ron. I went from a position of trying to talk him out of it to being a part of it. But the thoughts and doubts were still running through my mind "I'm not a good hot day runner -how would I be able to cope - would I be liability?"

Ron in his usual methodical way had thoroughly researched the desert. He had gone back and looked at the accounts of the early explorers. Those men who traversed the country without maps and who like Ron had a dream or vision of achieving something in taking on this wild terrain. The year before he had made a test drive across the desert determining the route and seeking out the markers left by French seismologists many years before.

Now that he had me, another running friend Bob Hill and his brother-in-law John Kirby signed up on the dotted line, Ron went about preparing me as part of his crew. He told me I need to get acclimatised to the heat, go for runs in the middle of the day - I did. Drive your car with the windows up. I drove from Brisbane to Maryborough with my windows up. I had an air-conditioned car but I didn't put it on to acclimatise myself. I was focusing myself for this ordeal. All this, and I was not running across the desert, I was just part of the support crew doing a few running stints.

This was in the time before the appearance of lightweight synthetic sports material, so to dress myself appropriately I went to the local Lifeline shop and bought some old long sleeve, loose fitting cotton shirts. Ron had looked at how the Middle Eastern people dressed for their hot climate. He had developed a legionnaires type neck protection and it was to become something of a trademark for him.



Ron Grant and Paul Circosta dressed for the desert.

My wife Mary and I set off for Brisbane for the last few days preparation before we leave for the desert. In Brisbane we stayed with my mother. My mum asked if I was going to take a jumper as it might get cold at nighttime. Mum's always think of these things. My thinking had been so focused on the heat that I hadn't even considered other possibilities - I packed a windcheater.

In convoy we left Brisbane on the twenty-ninth of December without Ron who was to follow later by plane. The trip out from Brisbane to Birdsville was uneventful apart from some minor problems with the vehicles. The sponsors had provided six Niva Lada four-wheel drive vehicles. These Russian built vehicles were serviceable but definitely not at the upper end of the four-wheel drive market.

The assembled crew comprised of Bill Canfield and Doug Emery from Sci Fleet. Jumbuck Productions provided the film crew comprising sound recordist Rolly McManus and cameramen Brian Doyle and Richard Michalak who were there to document the record attempt. The media representatives were

Benny Pike, Steve Groves and photographer Garratt Jones with Bob Hill, John Kirby and me as Ron's "minders."

Our westward travels saw us arriving in Charleville our first major stop. Our major objective was to visit the local Flying Doctor base to pick up a large green medical kit that is being loaned to us. These kits are ones given to remote properties who have no easy access to a doctor. After leaving Charleville I knew we had hit the real west when the bitumen ran out somewhere past the town of Windorah. The town is in the channel country, an ancient flood plain cut up by dry rivers that only flow in the rainy season.

We drove on pulling up for a break at the Betoota Hotel. It is a tiny slip of a town on the gibber plain it largely consisted of a racecourse and a pub. From here onto our last Queensland stop, Birdsville on the edge of the Simpson Desert. This was where we would track back to at the end the run. We arrived in the evening to find the town relatively well populated and the local New Years Eve celebrations underway.

In amongst the denim jeans and R.M. Williams boots we were easy to pick 'as the non-locals , as we were the ones wearing the running shoes and joggers. "You aren't going to wear those in the out there?" growled a large Birdsville local at us as he looked at our shoes. "The burrs will cut through them." What burrs, Ron didn't tell me about them, all he gave me was a couple of pairs of over boot guards to keep the sand out of my shoes. Well, we didn't need any burr guards, we didn't see or feel a burr. In fact, John Kirby, a cane farmer and used to going barefooted went *sans* shoes for parts of the trip across the desert. When we got back to Birdsville the major sponsor, Sci-Fleet put on drinks in the Birdsville Hotel, for the crew, media and locals. I noted that our pre crossing prophet of doom partook of the cheer with no further mention of burrs.

The first morning of the new year dawned as we fuelled the cars before setting off down the well-known Birdsville track to the South Australian town of Maree. The trip was memorable only for its dual torments of hotness and boringness.

The first part of the trip to Maree took us across part of the Sturt Stony desert. It was slow bumpy driving and hot with little interesting country. Somewhere on the track, we pulled up for lunch. This fine fare consisted of arrowroot biscuits topped with peanut paste. There were no trees, no shade, nowhere to get out of the sun, we had truly left the civilised world behind. Fortunately, our 4WD vehicles each had CB radios to allow communication between the vehicles and an UHF radio connected to the Flying Doctor Network which was our only connection with the outside world.

The enormity of the country could be appreciated when we drove past signposts to homesteads advising any would be visitor that the house was 60 kilometres in from the front gate.

I knew we had left Queensland behind and passed into South Australia when the signposts stated indicating distances to the town of Maree where the Birdsville and Oodnadatta tracks met. The South Australians had very sensibly listed the distances to Maree as ending in the number nine. It's amazing how much better 99 kilometres to go sounds than 100 kilometres to go.

We overnighted at an old two storied pub in Maree. In the morning, we took a quick look at the town's disused workshop sheds that serviced the Ghan railway. The Ghan railway which originally ran from Port Augusta to Alice Springs was began back in 1878 and finally finished in 1929 providing a civilising link to this country.

From Maree we set off for the town of Oodnadatta along the so named track which skirted the edge of Lake Eyre (Kati Thanda) a large, dry salt lake that seldom fills with water. Along the way we passed

the skeletal remains of the Ghan railway. We pulled in to look at one of the old sidings, itself decaying as things do when the hand of human maintenance is withdrawn and nature moves back in to reclaim what is hers.

Travelling through that country one gets a real respect for those that went first, surveying the line and those who lived in those remote sidings. I always had the feeling of being something of an intruder in that country.

To save his back from stiffening up on a long car trip, Ron had flown from Brisbane to Adelaide and then on to Oodnadatta in a small plane. From here we set off for Alka Selzer bore where the run was to start. To cross the Simpson, we were going to follow a seismic shot line known as the French Line. It had been surveyed in the 1960's by a group of French seismologists hence its name. On the map it was dead straight line marked back in the sixties by survey pegs. Deserts aren't static places and the survey markers were mostly not visible covered in by the soft summer sands and sandstorms that reshaped the country. We would have to use a compass to ensure we were tracking the most direct route. John Kirby regularly took readings to see that we were keeping on course.

At Alka Selzer bore in the early afternoon sun a banner was erected to mark the start. Ron was sent on his way by a rifle shot fired by John Kirby.

The start was covered by a television crew and media people who had flown in from Adelaide landing on the rough, unsealed airstrip adjacent to the bore. One of the reporters who had taken his jacket off in the heat was concerned he would get into trouble with his producer for not appearing in his jacket. I noted none of the rest of us were in jackets.

Leaving the bore the lead in country soon gave way to sandhills. I was travelling in a vehicle driven by Benny Pike a former Olympic boxer and then working in the media. Benny had been engaged by a Brisbane radio station to cover the crossing. The publicity people had asked us to count the number of sandhills we crossed, somehow Benny and I got the job. Benny drove and I with notebook and pen in hand I started creating tally marks as we bounced over the first ten or so sandhills. We quickly realised that this was going to be a lot more to take our attention than to count sandhills so I permanently consigned the notebook to the glovebox. Later I was to discover that the crossing took in over one thousand sandhills.

Before we left Oodnadatta Ron gathered us together for a briefing filmed by the crew. He spoke about us not wandering off as one sandhill looked like another. This was no idle safety warning as people even in vehicles had lost their lives when they became disoriented in this barren expanse.

I was appointed first aid officer - obviously, they had been warned about my lack of cooking prowess. Bob Hill and I spent time with the community nurse who explained to us how we could give someone an injection if it was needed.

We were a somewhat disjointed crew the first night into the run. Getting the camp set up was a bit chaotic. We got better as we learnt to park the vehicles near one another and attach a tarp to the roof racks. This quickly gave us a shaded area out of the sun. The next day may go down as the most miserable day of my life. I had come down with a bug and was totally crook. So, I crawled under one of the vehicles to get out of the sun. It was miserable and I felt awful. I couldn't lift my head without hitting a diff or something. I remember Ron coming up and asking me how I felt. I was worried that I would have to be air lifted out by the Flying Doctor or something. I was supposed to be looking after Ron and was having trouble look after myself!

In the rear of one of the vehicles was the large, green medicine chest loaned to us by the Royal Flying Doctor service. It was very comprehensive and was usually given to people on remote properties. I rummaged through and found some medication that I thought would be good and started dosing myself. Because of my condition, I went in the lead car with John Kirby to go ahead and scout the track. Later that day I started to feel better.

Apart from my first aid duties which had largely been on myself, I had two other major responsibilities. One was to keep a diary for substantiation purposes and secondly to log the temperatures we encountered.

Ron had checked with the Guinness Book of Records people about the requirements to claim a record as the world's hottest run. I was given two thermometers to measure temperatures. Using both thermometers, I set up a procedure of recording both air and ground temperatures. One thermometer was laid on the ground to measure the temperature of the sand. The other was hung across the small Gidgee bushes that dotted the countryside to measure air temperature. This process was repeated whenever I got a chance. The results and time of day were recorded in an exercise book that served as our logbook. I recall logging temperatures at around 50 degrees Celsius.



Ron and Paul tracking through the desert.

Wherever possible, Ron would try and run in the relatively most favourable times, generally early morning and evening. In the hottest part of the day is when we just pulled up and stuck it out. Generally, one of us would always run with Ron doing a two-to-three-kilometre stint. Sometimes a vehicle may be following us at other times we could have been ahead of but always not very far from the vehicles. Those of us who were running found we were developing nose bleeds. We put this down to breathing in the hot desert air which burst the small blood vessels inside our noses. Many of the crew also pitched in and did stints with Ron.

Sometime on the second day we were coming into Poeppel Corner so named after an early surveyor in the area. Poeppel Corner is where the borders of the three states Queensland, Northern Territory and South Australia meet. It was situated on a rise with a marker stone and a visitors' book. Near the marker cairn was a tap. We had been three days without a shower. Our drinking water had been packed into special tanks in the rear of the vehicles before we left Brisbane. When I spotted this tap, I immediately saw myself running cool water over my head. Alas the tap was just that, an unconnected tap - a prank placed several years before by the ACT 4WD Club. I cursed them for their cruel hoax.

On the following day I happened to be in the lead vehicle with cameraman Brian Doyle. The sun was just starting to come up when we heard that Ron had decided to pull up for a rest. Brian and I decided to do the same. Brian climbed up on the bonnet of the car as his bed and I was left with tossing my swag on the ground and lying on it. I don't know how long I was there but something made me look up. Only metres away from me was a dingo taking us in. I don't think he was looking at me to be breakfast, he was more curious about us. I tried to call to Brian in a hushed voice to get

his attention so he could film our caller. I couldn't arouse Brian. Our warrigal visitor's curiosity of us waned and he seemed to just disappear back into the desert.

On other occasions we had seen the large hoofprints of camels but not the camels themselves. In a desert you learn to appreciate you are never truly alone.

We monitored Ron's progress and we knew he was making good time. I thought the record was in the bag but Ron was much more cautious. Ron's caution turned out to be correct as the last section turned out in some ways to be the most difficult.

In a latter stage of the run, I was doing a stint accompanying Ron and we were talking, he was in the right *wheel rut* and I was in the centre strip between the two ruts. Suddenly, Ron's hand shot across my waist and halted me. Slithering across the red sand in front of us was a large three-metre-long green snake whose shimmering skin was in stark contrast against the earthy, red sand. I didn't know if it was venomous, I didn't care. Ron's quick action had prevented an encounter where I might have come off second best. I went off to tell the rest of the crew about the big snake. The cameramen were delighted and raced up to get close ups. Several of the other crew took photos. Me - I watched it all from a discreet distance away.

We were running low on petrol, we had nursed one vehicle through with a flat battery from near the start of the crossing. Late on the third day Benny Pike and an offsider were dispatched off to get fuel and to bring back the local police sergeant Bob Goad to guide us in for the last stretch. The rest of us requested Benny to bring back something to drink other than water.

We knew we were getting close to Birdsville with talk revolving around this big upcoming sandhill known as Big Red and as Nappanericca by the local indigenous people. For some reason the vehicle I was in decided to go around the hill rather than over this landmark.

The sun pushed up on the eastern horizon. We didn't know how far it was to Birdsville but we knew it wasn't far. The country became stonier. As from nowhere people started to appear. They were media people and I recall watching and hearing the media people doing reports from the sand ridges. Benny Pike returned with an esky full of Popper fruit juices. I remember drinking a swag of these. For Ron, after what must have seemed an eternity, he arrived in Birdsville fittingly finishing the 375 kilometres at the famous pub. He had run 3 days 20 hours 35 minutes. This was well inside his old record which had been done during a winter crossing. Strangely I don't remember a lot about the concluding part of the run. I do remember heading off to the bar for a few drinks and having a shower for the first time in four days.

Sometime later in the afternoon one of the team and I took a 4WDs and went to look at the famous Birdsville racetrack home to the Birdsville Cup. I recall water was flowing under the low bridge that crossed the Diamantina River. Running water seemed strangely out of place in this country. This water would have tumbled from the skies many months previous and worked its way down through the Channel country. The famous racetrack was deserted, a low loader with a big scoop stood idly near poles with shade cloth slung over them. I imagined the major purpose of this machine was to scoop up the thousands of discarded beer cans and bottles that quenched thirsts at these popular races.

That night we had dinner in an area at the back of the hotel and then adjourned to the air-conditioned bar. The local police sergeant Bob Goad came in and announced that the temperature was 39 degrees and this was seven pm in the evening! I guess this was cool compared to the near 50-degree ground temperatures I had recorded during the run. One might have expected that night

the pub would have been filled with high revelry, but it wasn't. I think most of us were too worn out for anything more.



Group photo of the crossing team and other supporters the day after the end of the run.

The following morning, we left for the trip back to Brisbane reversing the way we had come out. We arrived back in Brisbane late in the evening to stay overnight at the now renamed Crest Hotel. The next day was to be a civic reception in the Queen Street Mall for Ron. It was held about midday and a large crowd turned up. It was a fitting tribute to Ron. He was given a trophy comprising a bottle filled with the red Simpson Desert sand. After the function we went back to the hotel for a final get together of the crew before setting off for our respective homes.

I appreciated being a part of that undertaking and being able to share with Ron in his achievement. I believe I learnt a couple of important lessons from this undertaking.

Firstly, don't try to disagree with someone like Ron Grant when they have their mind set on something. This should be particularly so when that person has runs on the board. When Ron said he was going to have a go at the 1000 hour record I knew this idea had been incubating for some time and that you would have to back him.

Secondly things don't always end up as bad as they might first seem. Ultimately, we found that the desert was bearable, we survived, we planned well, had good back up facilities and a good group of people. These things were no accidents. Someone once said, "adventure is a result of a lack of planning". No one could ever accuse Ron Grant of not being prepared.

Postscript

In 1986 Ron and ultramarathoner Tony Rafferty undertook a summer match race across the desert with Ron again breaking his record with a time of 3 days 17 hours 52 minutes. These were followed by other summer crossings firstly by Queensland ultra marathoner Dave Holleran in 1995 and in the following year by world record setting, ultra runner Pat Farmer who shaved a dozen minutes off Ron's crossing record.

In 2008 with increasing concern for safety, the South Australian government closed the Simpson Desert to summer crossings not only on foot but even in four-wheel drive vehicles.

With this the era of the summer crossings by ultra runners had ended leaving the exploits of these few adventurers noted somewhere in historical records.



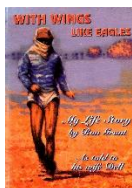
A sign warning of the ever-present dangers in the desert.

About the author: Paul Circosta is an author and historical sporting researcher and has had along involvement in the sport of athletics. He originally compiled this first version of the story at the request of Dell Grant shortly after the run. The original text was updated to this version.

The following publications give the runners own perspectives and reflections about their crossing of the Simpson Desert.



Ian Eckersley, *Running on a Dream, The Pat Farmer Story*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2000. ISBN 9781865 084114.



Ron Grant, *With Wings like Eagles, My Life Story*, The Print Run, 1999. ISBN 06463 73005.

David Holleran's account of his crossing: *Simpson Desert, Alka Saltzer bore to Birdsville via the French Line – 379 kilometres –1162 sand dunes*, was published in the Queensland Ultra Runners Club Newsletter, May 1995, Vol1, No3.