



### Racing the planet incident

I first was asked by Scott Connell (a local volunteer) to help volunteer for racing the planet about a week prior to the event. This was my first experience with a large marathon.

We had a briefing day and athlete enrolment from 10:00 in the morning to about 21:30 at night the day before the race. We were given a sheet of the jobs we were assigned to. We had doctors that work for racing the planet attend (Brandy, Allan and another lady) also staff (Rita, Sam and Emma) that were there to teach us things like the use of Sat phones, tent construction, sweeper duties and check point duties. We also had to pack the different cars that go to different check points for the day. The doctors gave us information on snake bites, dehydration ECT. We were not given any information about fires except at the competitor briefing where they mentioned there were fires out on parts of the track and they may burn ribbons that the competitors followed. My job on the competitor enrollments was to look through their bags to make sure they were carrying the equipment they were supposed to along with two others. I was asked before I went home, to be back in the morning at 04:15 to drive out to Emma gorge to set up the start line.

I came to the Kimberly Grand at 04:15 Friday 02/09/11. I had my bag packed and I drove along with three others one person's name was Rita, an employee of RTP. We arrived to Emma Gorge just before the sun rose. We started to unpack the car once we knew where we going to set up. We were under a fairly tight schedule due to the races being there by around 08:30. We soon realized we were missing one of the poles for the banner. This put Rita under some strain as we had the company owner Mary competing in the event and she wanted the banner and everything else perfect. I suggested that I could drive back to Kununurra to pick the banner pole up and she said it would be better to sat phone Sam and ask her to bring the missing pole. Rita tried to use the hire sat phone a number of times and had no luck. She passed it to me to have a look and I also could not get it to work. I suggested we drive five mins into Emma Gorge to use their land line. We did this, The Emma Gorge staff was very happy to help. While Rita phoned Sam I went with the gardener to see if I could find another pole for the job. We could not find a pole. Rita did manage to get a hold of Sam to bring the missing pole. We went back to the start line and continued with all the jobs with the others. It got to about 07:30 and the pole still had not come we made a plan to use a wood pole in its place. This worked fine. The competitors arrived to the start line within minutes of Sam arriving.

At the start of the race everyone got themselves ready and took photos. The media were interviewing people there was a chopper, Bell Jet ranger flying around filming. The vibe in the air was very positive maybe except for the owner Mary who seem to be scrutinizing her staff a little.

The racers were briefed by Sam and then John Story (a local bushwalker, gyro pilot), who really emphasized drinking a lot of water. He talked about the local temps and humidity ECT. No one warned anyone about the dangers of fires. Smoke was mentioned at some point.

The competitors started the race, the four of us that put up the start line deconstructed it, packed the car and drove to CP 1 where I and two others (Andrea and Emma) was to give the runners water, write times and give encouragement.

LON CROOT *Lon*



After all competitors had run through Emma and I were to sweep behind the race to collect all the ribbons and make sure everyone was getting through the course. We started about 40mins behind the last racer. We had walked about 70% between the CP 1 and CP 2 when Andrea (a local volunteer), PT and Cox San (volunteers) came back with the car to catch us up with the slowest runner. We started walking for a further five minutes when Scott, Carlos and Mary's husband asked me to hope in their car. Emma was left to walk on her own. The car took me to check point two, they briefed me that there were fires out on the track and that I was to run in front of as many competitors as I could. I think they chose me because I was more aware than the out of town people about the terrain and fires in the area. They gave me a GPS some leg guards and spare ribbon to re apply to the track. They were a little panicky about people not being able to find their way and the ribbons being burned. I don't think they took in the dangers of the actual fires still at this time.

I filled my camel pack fitted my leg guards took the GPS and ribbon and went into the area between CP 2 and CP 3. There were a few ribbons missing in the first ten mins where they had been burned off in the last 2 or so hours. After about 15 mins I past three female competitors and continued on, there was quite a lot of smoke in the air where fires were burning previously. Ahead of me there was a great deal of smoke from a fire that was burning ahead of me. After about 25mins of walking/running I came across Martian and Brenda (2 competitors), they were an older sensible couple that said that someone in front of them told them to turn around and head back. I agreed with them and said I think you should tell everyone on the way back to go back as well. I continued further on the track to see if I could see or talk to the people that said go back. I got to a ridge and looked down to see the fire approaching the area we were in. I felt a real sense of danger being where I was in relation to the fire. I could see two people that I thought were in serious danger of being burned from the approaching fire. I called out to them to retreat back towards me. I am sure they heard me but did not try to come back out. I think the fire was so close to them they may not have been able to out run it anyway. I had a very sick feeling that I was going to witness people die. I called to them again but they stayed put.

I do not to this moment understand why they did this. I believe these competitors were tired from running maybe not enough sleep and their drive to continue was more than their common sense. I also talked to a few lucky escape competitors later that said the event would not put them into danger so they thought they would be safe.

I stayed put watching these two people waiting while the fire approached. The wind started to pick up and the fire got stronger the two people I witnessed started to get hot and smoke started to engulf them from my view. Last minute they started to run to higher ground there was a rock there and they made their way towards it. One of them let out a horrible scream that sounded very bad. I could not see them anymore due to the smoke. I should have waited to see how they fared but I believed at this point these two people were very badly burned and possibly fatal.

My thoughts were also with the other competitors ahead of these two that had to have also come across the fire.

LOW CROOT *the*



I made a quick decision with the fire threatening me, to make my way back to CP 2 and take all the competitors. I wanted talk to the doctor and officials about what I had seen. I can't say that I wasn't a little panicky about the fire catching up and burning me so I really ran but careful to not injure myself. On the way back just before I reached Martian and Brenda my legs gave way to cramps and I fell over. Martian and Brenda came back to assist me. I was able to get up but not without some pain and continued. I assured everyone I saw to return to CP 2 and forget about the race. Some were disappointed but I assured them it was not a good idea to keep going. I did not tell them what I had seen in fear they would become irrational. We returned to CP2 where I talked to Brandy the course doctor, I told her privately that I had witnessed fire burn victims with others ahead that I had not witnessed but must have come in contact. I said you need to contact SES or a chopper to assess the people. (I heard later that the chopper pilot and someone in RTP had an argument about who was going to pay for the chopper.) Still taking into consideration at this point it was only my word that anything was wrong at all. If I hadn't of waited to see those two people burn I am not sure I could have said anything.

Things from here I believe went very slowly, I know when you are suffering from shock things slow down but this seemed ridiculous. Brandy used they Sat phone to alert other race organizers and maybe an ambulance. CP 2 where we were standing was also in danger of being burned by the same fire that had now crossed the hill was still approaching. There was only one troop carrier from RTP and a troop carrier of a civilian whom I knew was Ebony Muirson. I asked Ebony if we could put some of the nine competitors in her car as RTP troopy was full of medical supplies and could only fit around 6 of us. We left all not essential items there, e.g. CP tent, tables ect. We made a decision to go back to the Gibb river road to be on the safe side of the fire and make contact with more people. As we were leaving Ben Solino drove in his hilux and started his way toward the track on foot. I hoped out of the car to talk to him and told him not to go in to the area. He said it was his country he had been fighting these fires and he would be fine. So I left him. Brandy drove the car and Ebony drove her car. I felt quite uneasy the whole time Brandy drove as I could tell she did not have very much experience with a 4x4. We very nearly drove into a washout and I am fairly certain Brandy didn't even notice. Emma from the moment we hopped in the car started to account for people this is a job she did very well for the rest of the day. I think this was a valuable thing. FESA said they would not come out unless we had accurate numbers missing. (So I was told by Brandy)

At the Gibb river road we seemed to waste endless time waiting for decisions to be made and Sat phones to ring or work. At least one Sat phone did not work and the radios RTP had were completely useless, they would not work I guess because the hills and they were not UHF so no cars could relay information. While we were there James Solino the father of Ben and the owner of the pastoral lease on El Questro, pulled over. He said we were panicking over nothing and we shouldn't be worried because a grass fire would not burn very badly. I disagreed with him told him what I had seen and he said maybe it does not sound too good. Ben Solino also came by again and said he had flown over the range that morning and said that half the hill had burned and everyone could have gone to the burned section to get away from the fire. He said he could go and get his chopper and see if everyone was ok but he then said he had to be in the territory that afternoon to attend some army exercise. So he didn't.

LOW CROOY *Al*



The decision to drive the competitors to the Gibb River road turn of was eventually made. So we set off in the two cars to this point. Dropped everyone off, we left Junior (a volunteer) Martian and Brenda who were very responsible to wait with all the others until Brandy said they could move. They were left without a car but everyone agreed they were in a safe place and left with loads of water.

Emma, Brandy and I made our way to CP 3 after what seemed me a very long time to me. They didn't know there way and went the opposite way first then worked out roughly where to go after reassessing the map. There was another CP put up along the road toward CP 3 (apparently because competitors were making it to CP 3 without water). There was only Cox San (a volunteer) waiting at this CP. Andrea (a local volunteer) had already taken her personnel car into the track to try and help the burned competitors. This turned out to be invaluable. I stood on the back of the troopy and saw her making her way through the bush in extremely rough terrain. We spent a long time waiting at this point, trying to call people with radios and sat phones. Emma was starting to get the number of people missing together. It was starting to look like 11 people had been left unaccounted for. A chopper flew over and into the area where the people that were burned waited. A call came through from Sam that said the chopper pilot confirmed burn victims. I saw John in the gyrocopter go over and I tried to get him on the uhf radio. Andrea ended up answering the call from her car. Brandy took over and asked her loads of questions, Mary also came on the radio, Emma, Brandy and Mary worked out who by race number was missing.

After about an hour of us first getting to this temporary CP, a media car turned up in a Nissan, not to be media but to help in anyway. Then 2 ambulances turned up within 15 mins of media. Not long after the ambulances turned up the decision was made for the hire troopy, the media Nissan and the 4x4 ambulance to drive in to the area. Andrea told us it would take 30mins to do, and it was very rough. Our car with me driving seemed to travel through at a better pace then the other two. I thought it would be good to get at least one doctor (Brandy) there as quickly as possible. John Story came over when we were half way there and guided us in with his gyrocopter.

When we got in there there we saw Mary, Andrea and a load of others, most people were up on the ridge with Kate and Turia. It was now I realized, that it was Mary and Rod that I had seen get caught by the fire. I was surprised to see they were relatively ok. Mary whom I guess I heard scream had burns to her hands and arms but was standing and was shaken but talking fine. Rod was completely fine. I said to them that I thought you two were goners. Mary was a completely different person to the Mary I saw at the start line she was much nicer and grateful for the help. Two unhurt competitors had walked from the area (before we arrived) back to CP 2 to see if anyone else burned, not knowing we had all retreated. Brandy and I went to the Medical troopy to get things like IV and whatever else she needed. I went up the hill and saw the two badly burned victims (Kate and Turia) lying down near a tree. They were a fair distance up the hill. The other competitors had done as much as they could for them both with the limited supplies they had. When I got to them Turia looked at me, I tried to give her my best, and you will be fine look. She was terribly burned and so was Kate. I recall large areas of skin missing from both the girls. I guess they were in terrible shock. Brandy came up there after me and didn't really do a lot she asked questions and tried to put an IV into Kate's ankle but it kept falling out of her skin. The South African paramedic (from Kununurra), that drove the 4x4 ambulance came up not long after us and

Low Croot *he*



was brilliant. He took over very quickly and started to help the girls. He is obviously a natural. There was not much left for me to do at this stage but watch. The chopper pilot that came in early said there will be a possibility of a bell long ranger balancing one skid on the cliff while they loaded the girls. This would save us trying to lift the girls with stretchers down the hill and about 2km to where the other chopper could land. I don't think that would have been very good on them. Not long after, the long ranger came around and attempted this. I told everyone it is going to get very windy and dusty. The chopper pilot did an amazing job of coming in and putting a skid on the edge. The other chopper pilot guided him on; (I have a close relationship with aviation and know of the difficulty of this evacuation. Not only was this chopper and pilot having to half hover while needing to keep a skid on the cliff edge, there was the slope of the hill to worry about with the blades and a tree very close also.) I was seriously thinking this could turn into a massive disaster. But absolute credit to the pilots and chopper, they loaded Kate in, I am not sure what they did with her but guess they took her at the bottom somewhere before they came back for Turia. Everyone protected Turia as best they could from the dust and wind of the chopper taking off. The paramedic also hopped in with Turia.

After both girls were taken away they took the walking burn victims back with the other chopper. With it getting dark very soon, the rest of us now also a police car from Wyndam drove back in formation with me leading, to the temporary CP. I can't emphasize enough on how rough the terrain was. It got dark pretty much as we left the site.

When we got there we discovered Cox San who was left at the temporary CP had left with the CP bag and the com bag. She was later found by people at CP 3 I believe.

The two people that walked back through to CP 2 were apparently picked up by a local and taken to Wyndam.

We stayed and packed up the temporary CP. The ambulances and the media car left with as many competitors as they could carry. We drove back to where we had dropped off the group of competitors and volunteers earlier. Sam, Rita, Carlos and Mary's husband came to meet with Emma and Brandy. We all waited for ages till I got upset with waiting and asked if I could take a car with people in back to town. Brandy took her things out of the troopy and said we could go. I drove about 6 competitors in along with two volunteers back to town in the hire troopy.

Once I arrived at the Kimberly grand I called Scott on his Mobile, he was out on his bike putting glow sticks out between the finish line and CP 6. He did not know anything about the race stopping and was quite surprised about the burn victims. He said he was very thirsty so I said I will come out to pick him up in my Ute. I asked Andrea if she could come with me to have room for extra competitors (that had made it past the fire earlier) if we needed. She agreed, and we drove back down the track. When we got to CP 6 Scott had already made it and was chatting to the girls there. Brenda and I decided to go back to CP 5 to see if they needed help getting people out. As we arrived they were thankful for the extra room as there were loads of people to take back. We drove back to CP 6 with 3 extra people with Allan the doctor behind in another car. Carlos was there too but he had to drive back to CP 4 to meet with Sam.

LOW CROOY *the*



When we got to CP 6 again I dropped Brenda off chatted then said I am tired and want to go home. I drove three competitors back then went home for a shower and a sleep.

LON CROFT *ll*