

EXERCISE BOLD CATCHER

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Background

In early 1983 a proposal for an Adventure Training Exercise was researched. The concept for the exercise was to muster wild cattle that had become a nuisance to station owners. Due to a lack of "Problem Cattle", the exercise was postponed until July 1984.

After a successful reconnaissance of Escott Station (a large cattle property 17km West of Burketown), it was decided that this area of the Gulf country would be the perfect venue for exercise Bold Catcher. The management of both Escott Station and CO 2/4 RAR gave the go-ahead, and the exercise was scheduled for 7-18 July '84.

On 7 July '84, a roadparty of seven vehicles and 16 members of a 40 man group left for Burketown. After a number of mechanical breakdowns and delays, the convoy arrived at Escott Station two days and 1100km later. The remaining 26 members of the group commanded by Maj Wilson flew in by RAAF Caribou on 9 July '84.

The exercise group of 40 was based in a muster camp from which muster groups (Bulldroppers), left each day to hopefully find the object bulls. After a fairly graphic demonstration of bull catching on the second day by the property owner the team set out to catch cattle.

The Equipment

As in all specialist operations, we required special equipment. Our equipment was fairly simple (but expensive), and consisted of two modified Landrovers.

The vehicles used were two standard vehicles which were stripped down to bonnet level, with a heavy duty bull-bar bolted to the front. These were then adorned with an array of old landrover and truck tyres which gave some protection to the bull, but more importantly to the crew. Each vehicle was then equipped with a collection of chains, straps, ropes, binoculars, compass, maps, brew gear and the inevitable radio, thus we had our ultimate tool of trade — the bulldropper.

The Tactics

The basic bulldropper team consisted of two bulldroppers, three motorcycles and a command vehicle (a non-combatant FFR). The general tactic was to patrol across country in "line abreast" until contact was made. After a hurried contact report, the two combat vehicles would move forward — one flushing out the bull whilst the other remained posed for the attack. Once the bull was identified (by its fairly delicate but obvious physical attributes) it would be chased out "flanked on" to the attack vehicle, which would then race forward and bowl it

over — fairly gently (an acquired skill as Pte 'Blue' Lee can report — his 'first' bull was KIA).

Once this immediate action had occurred, the crew of the bulldropper would unhesitatingly leap out of their vehicles and immobilize the dazed bull. As soon as the situation was stable, the command vehicle crew would move forward and complete trussing up the unfortunate animals legs while the bulldroppers would move off and continue the operation.

Although the concept was fairly simple, to put it into practice was another matter. The seemingly easy act of leaping on a bull and strapping its legs together after it had been rammed by a landrover three or four times is not simple. It is very hard to convince oneself to ease out of a nice safe vehicle to be faced by a ton of angry twitching bull, just aching to get revenge on a poor unsuspecting soldier.

Nevertheless, we achieved success and managed to capture ten or so bulls during our seven days of mustering. A few cows had some close shaves as our long range identification was not quite up to scratch.

The Muster Camp

Our base camp was home for the seven days of mustering. It was run along the lines of a simple muster camp with the addition of our vital vehicle repair team and a rear link back to Townsville. Bulldroppers left each day for the operational area (a 60 square mile paddock) and returned at night.

Rations were fresh and cooked on either an open fire or an obsolete Fowler stove (probably a refugee from the Boer War). Despite a number of minor problems in rationing, everyone managed to survive adequately if not well. I doubt if anyone will ever be able to face a fresh egg or damper again.

The vehicles were literally held together with pieces of wire and bits of string. It was the efforts of our RAEME detachment (Kefty and Christo) who managed to coax and reshape the vehicles so that they managed to complete the exercise.

The Personalities

Although forty members of the Adventure Training group participated in activities as diverse as assistant cooks to bulldroppers there are some personalities which are worthy of mention:

- Who can possibly forget when Lcpl Ryan flew through a landrover window without even touching the sides — just because he was being charged by a bull.

- Lcpl Mure distinguished himself by a spectacular display of horse-breaking — for at least 50 seconds, until the horse decided that having someone on its back was all too boring.

- Maj 'Jack Brabham' Wilson really put the bullcatcher through its paces when he proved to his passengers just how versatile a landrover is. Cpl Knapp and company were quite surprised that a landrover performs equally as well on two wheels as it does on four. When its upside down however, it is no match for any bull.

- The A Coy Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals — just who did join?

- The unidentified 'city' soldier who said 'I didn't know cattle could crap when they are walking'.

- Pte 'Beaker' Elliott and the first lesson on hiding from bulls behind motorcycles (it doesn't work).

- Who said 'now which tree did we chain that last bull to' (statement made in the same 60 square mile paddock with many trees).

Summary

Despite the appearance of being a 'swan' or simply good fun there were many valuable military aspects gained from 'Bold Catcher'. There are few Adventure Training activities that present the opportunity to constantly challenge a soldier's physical courage, team work and determination - the wild bull muster operation placed each individual in various situations that demanded all these qualities and more.

The final score was A Coy - 10 Bulls, Bulls - 1 x landrover. A rewarding and challenging activity that will never be forgotten.



Waiting for Action.



On Bull Patrol.



Score: A Coy 1.



A load of bull.



Score: A Coy - 1. Bull 1.