

## NAVSHIELD 2003 – GARDENS OF STONE

Account of the Navshield winning Newcastle Bushwalking Club Team.

Team Members: Robert Vincent, Bert van Netten, Ian Dempsey, Shane Trotter, Mike Hotchkis and Wil de Sain.

Traveling North from Lithgow I had often looked out over the Gardens of Stone National Park towards Pantoneys Crown and thought what a marvelous area to walk. Little did I realise that the 2003 Navshield would take us right across the whole area. We did our route planning on Friday evening and considered that the walk out to #90 and Baal Bone Point was a must if only to see the views. Just the same, however, we did not want to be in those Pagodas at night and thought it was best to do this as a loop first up. We also considered that a high completion was possible and that we should plan a route that would cover the whole of the course. With this in mind, we thought that after the Pagodas we should travel north through Rowans Hole and return along the road through Baal Bone Gap to finish. This only left us to decide how we covered the area west of Pantoneys Crown. The route choice we came up with was one based on minimising the climbs and the descents more than reducing distance over the ground. This was based on the somewhat false premise that the vegetation would not be a problem. This did not exactly eventuate and needless to say we did not cover the whole course.

As we expected the views from the higher ground were magnificent and unlike the weather in the more recent past events, the weekend for the 2003 Navshield was great although very cold in the early mornings. We moved along nicely from the start and very much enjoyed the walking. The pagodas did not pose a problem until just above #42. We had trouble there exiting the ridge and took several false leads that all ended in a short drop that we could not scale down. We eventually got through but for a moment I wished that I had brought a hand line.

At Bravo Ian decided he could go no further and would have to retire. He had sprained his ankle just an hour into the event. This was a blow to the team but we were thankful that he was able to struggle through to a radio checkpoint. From Bravo we traveled north and dusk overtook us somewhere just after #55. We had planned to have a hot drink break just after nightfall but thought now it was best to take this stop at Charlie. We could then sit around the fire as well and plan what we would do further.

It was clear at this point that we would have to cut the course shorter. Some of the long traverses west of Charlie looked very menacing to do at night, especially #64 to #80 and after #57. We decided then that we would follow Airly Creek to #73 and #74 and then come back across to the east. This worked well, despite that some of the controls were a challenge to find in the night. The team did a great job with the navigating, there was always someone that would step forward to take the lead as another tired or sought to have a rest.

We saw first light coming onto #65. This was helpful because we could pick the low saddle on the ridge against the light glow of dawn. Everyone seemed to pick up a little now. We were heading into another beautiful day and the bush came alive with birdcalls. When we came across a group of red-tailed black cockatoos it was impossible not to stop and admire their beauty. We crossed under the north of Pantoneys Crown and worked through the controls down to radio checkpoint Alpha. We could see that it was still a long way back and it was now after 10. We debated about boiling a billy but fortunately some of the attendants at the checkpoint offered us hot water. This had to be the best cup of tea any of us had had in a long time.

We decided to forego #67 and move straight onto #91 and back across to #75. The pace was markedly slower but then came the hill up to Baal Bone Gap. This was very cruel after nearly 27 hours on the march and we were near exhaustion at the top. Whilst we had plenty of time to finish it would have required a bit of a jog to get #58 and get back on time. At that thought we were all unanimous. Control #58 could stay, we were heading back now!

We were pleased with our effort and felt we had done well, but it is always a nervous wait as the teams rush back in and the results go up. This is certainly the toughest event of its kind but a great challenge and an opportunity to test those navigation skills under the most difficult conditions. Well done to Bushwalkers Wilderness Rescue in staging the event. The course setting had been excellent and the site was superb. Those towering cliffs and pagodas will have us all eager to return.

Wil de Sain

The enclosed map shows the route that the team took. The time to reach the radio checkpoints was (as best I can recall) Bravo about 2pm, Charlie around 10pm and Alpha at 9.30am.