

## SUBW TRIP REPORT

# NavShield 2009 - July 4-5

**PRESENT AND ACCOUNTED FOR: James, Jo, Mitchell, Tom.**

One of the most important safety nets we have as bushwalkers (whether we use it or not) is the Bushwalkers Wilderness Rescue Squad. The BWRS is a group of volunteers specialising in bush search and rescue, and each year it organises the NavShield -- an event with the noble aim of attracting new BWRS members by the curious and sadistic practice of subjecting entrants to a gruelling series of navigational challenges during a 29-hour bash through the horrors of Australia's scrub wastelands in winter.

Navigation, for those not in the know, is the art of looking at the terrain and a map, working out where you are, where you'd like to be, and how to resolve this difference. Of course GPS technology is becoming common, but it's unclear that this is really useful for bush navigation, and in any case NavShield allows only a magnetic compass. A good navigator can take this compass, line it up, and start walking in that direction. The best navigators are already walking in that direction and only bring the compass for bragging rights.

Mitch was assembling a NavShield team this year and in a fit of pique and peak of fitness I put my hand up. "Why not!" I said. "It should be fun. I'll just jog to work every day on a bearing and be fighting fit by July." Then: winter. It was cold every day and thunderstorms the rest. Work went ballistic. Weddings. Baptisms. The Harry Potter films came out on Blu-ray. Even an eleventh-hour conversion to strict asceticism and a couple of lazy strolls around the block couldn't shake the feeling that I was letting the side down.

Disaster struck on Friday arvo with a member of our team struck down by a merciful divine act of influenza, but James leapt in and filled the spot with fourteen hours lead-time. We jammed on up to Jo's place at Springwood, mapped out the checkpoints, discussed strategy, and meta-reverse-sandbagged about how each of us was the least prepared and the most likely to go crazy at three in the morning, interleaved bizarrely with not-so-idle musings on whether we could get a perfect score.

Saturday morning saw 400-odd participants champing at the bit on a clear day in the frosted surrounds of Euroka Clearing, south of Glenbrook. This year the NavShield was in the eastern Blue Labyrinth: home to a number of decent beginner-friendly walks, Aboriginal art and popular mountain biking tracks; also known however for a number of disastrous navigational blunders in scunge-choked creeks, and an infamous four hour bash up a ridiculous mass of lawyer vines that sent one to Katoomba Hospital and the rest, traumatised, to a ten hour binge in the Grand View. Inauspicious! The checkpoints were widespread, though, so at the very worst we'd get a good sample of what the area had to offer.

We started strong to the south, finding creeks and junctions and subtle knolls exactly where we expected them, and powered up even the steepest hills while continually talking crap -- a calculated tactic for demoralising the other teams that continued, mysteriously, well into the lonely hours. It was only when we tried to take a clever shortcut to shave 20m off our route to a valuable checkpoint that we came unstuck. Almost an hour of rock-hopping and squinting at contours took us from way ahead of schedule to well behind. We hit the next checkpoint dead-on but the mood had shifted. Feelings of general goodwill towards the gentle landscape with its easy hills turned to resentment towards the ill-defined terrain and its lack of distinctive landmarks.

Soon, though, a surprise -- dropping into a watercourse we discovered that it comprised pleasant rock slabs and easy boulder hopping, hardly the ferny humusy slippery terrors of our past experiences. From that point we assumed every side-creek to be basically a secret 4WD track free of cyclists. This assumption served us well, even to the point of sacrificing an hour or so doing a gratuitous loop on Monkey Ropes Creek because it was so scenic.

As dusk came, disaster struck. James had been making strange sounds all day, as is traditional, but it became clear as he purged his alimentary canal from all ends that he was very unwell. In an extraordinary and extraordinarily generous gesture he pressed on regardless, but by the time we circled back to base with half our time gone he was a hollow man, and we sadly left him in his warm cosy sleeping bag as we forged back into the night.

All-night walking can be surreal and dangerous. We'd saved a cluster of easy checkpoints, so our wee hours alternated chilly roadbashes with the refreshing sting of scrubby ridges. I remember having an out-of-body experience while swinging between trees along Glenbrook Creek at 4am. It was a long, long night but we racked up some good points before the hallucinations forced us to lose 2000 valuable seconds to a joyless powernap. We awoke shivering in the twilight and grabbed a couple of easy checkpoints before breakfast, but spent considerable time vainly searching for a valuable checkpoint that we'd later be told was hidden below ground in a steel vault.

The last hours of the event are mostly a blur of flailing arms and a couple of dicky passes, but we shuffled back to base with fifteen minutes to spare and fell to the deck weeping with relief. James rushed up and cooed and shushed us and fed us warm drinks and told us stories about how awesome it had been to have a really decent sleep, and how good sleeping is. There were hot drinks and cake and the pleasant and slightly surprising news that we won the Class 2 event\*, and then the long journey back to Sydney whereupon I slept through my station twice.

I didn't think it at the time, but it was a great weekend with perfect weather. Thanks to Mitch the numbers-man, Jo the pacesetter, and James on short notice. I'd definitely recommend NavShield to anyone (maybe just the one-day version for starters) as a way to really build navigation skills and increase awareness of your surroundings while you're walking -- problem-based learning for a nominal fee plus a marginally devastated pair of legs, thermals and KT26s.

cheers tom

\* Class 1 is the main event but requires four or more in the team, so BWRS kindly allowed us to re-enrol on the trot in Class 2. We also won a Senior First Aid Course, and I believe there'll be arrangements to raffle that off to someone in the Club. Stay tuned.

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**Tom has kindly added to this great report at our request so that other teams may learn from what they did during the event.**

The list of check points visited can be found [\[here\]](#)

### **Tips about Navshield from Tom**

I'm sure you'll get better tips from the more experienced kinda proper teams, but there were a couple of things that I thought were really important.

- **Know your starters.** Make sure that everyone is going to make the whole distance. I think it's not unrealistic to assume that between piking and totally legitimate winter illnesses, a team

of six could expect only four people to compete on the day.

- **Definitely make sure that everyone can at least calculate a bearing on the run**, so that you can just yell numbers back and forth as you're going. This implies a bunch of other stuff, too: everyone is clear on what the next targets are, everyone is clear on where you are at the moment ...A definitive personal pet peeve is realising during a walk that you're the only one who knows how to navigate, so you won't have any feedback or discussion about it. I like to think that nobody is so foolhardy as to enter the Navshield with only one person with navigation chops on the way in.

- **Food: it's a marathon event, right?** There's never been a better excuse to pack whatever disgusting delicious foods you like, since you're going to work them off instantly. You'd be familiar with the way that appetite follows its own weird set of rules while you're doing this sort of bizarre weekend activity, so I packed a bunch of delicious foods, a couple of cheeses, biscuits, a dry cornucopia of different dehydrated fruits, might have been some chicken, I forget. The basic idea being that at any given time, there'd be something so delicious that I'd feel like eating it. Surprise winner: one third of a wheel of BiLo camembert, between the two halves of an English muffin. Cheap, delicious, takes ten seconds to prepare and gets you a massive carb hit. Of course if you eat it outside a Navshield / 3 Peaks context, your heart will explode and you'll die, so don't do that.

Bah, that was a bit longer than I thought. No real insights, just that if you can tag along on a team with someone who's been navigating in their sleep since age 3, and someone who runs half-marathons every other weekend, then it really provides an incentive to pull out all stops. I don't know that we ever really thought we might clear the course, but up until maybe 8am on the Sunday we hadn't actually decided that it was impossible, and that was a good motivation too.

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