At the General Meeting last August, our guest speakers included Chris Pet and Barry Golding. These two men were arranging a MultiMarathon across the Simpson Desert in September; starting at Lambert Centre near Finke and finishing at Birdsville. They were attempting 15 marathons in 15 days.

Chris and Barry were after support crew – members with vehicles to help out with the event. In exchange for volunteering, fuel, food, and accommodation would be provided. At this stage I thought it would be a great opportunity to be part of something different, and possibly part of a group of people who would set a record. Barry Golding has been the only person that had ever run 640 km across a desert in 15 days; achieved in 2009. Part of the plan during 2010 was to see if it could be done with the intention of organising a MultiMarathon the following year. The plan was for 15 Marathons in 15 days for 15 Charities.

Now that they knew it was possible to run across the Simpson Desert, Barry and Chris started arranging the event. This involved finding marathon runners keen to participate in the event, food supplies, camping gear, vehicles, support crew, and a paramedic team.

By mid-August it was all arranged. They had managed to get together a group of people from Queensland and NSW consisting of two GQ Nissans from the Newcastle 4WD Club, one HiLux, one Prado, and one 100 Series Diesel from the Sydney TLCC, along with one Pathfinder from the Bundaberg 4WD Club. There was also a 1993 110 Defender, and a Holden Colorado ute which were the MultiMarathon organisers: The St John First Aid team had a Holden Colorado Dual Cab.

The support crew consisted of eleven people plus a paramedic, nurse, and first aider, along with one runner from Sydney, and seven runners to be picked up from Alice Springs, for a total of 22 people.

The TLCC members that went as support crew were Dennis Northcott, Gary Walsh, Maria Reedy, and Mark Carroll. Although I did offer my dual cab HiLux, they said it was not required so I ended up leaving my truck at home and went as a roustabout. This ended up being a good decision as some of the people who took their
vehicles were not experienced long haul travellers, and I ended up helping out with quite a bit of the driving up to Alice Springs.

On September 9th, we all met at the Royal Botanical Gardens to meet the press and say our goodbyes before heading to Alice Springs to pick up the rest of the runners. We had already loaded up with all of the supplies the previous day.

The plan was to drive via Lithgow and Dubbo to meet the press, and then onto Alice Springs via Broken Hill, Port Augusta, Coober Pedy, and arriving at Alice Springs four days later after travelling 2785 km. That was a marathon in itself as Alex's vehicle, the 110 Defender, broke down 40 km out of Port Augusta. The bad news was that the diagnosis was terminal as the gearbox had let go. The vehicle ended up on a flatbed truck back to Port Augusta where it stayed for four weeks.

Alex was an important member of the trip as he was the only one who could operate the satellite communications system. The decision was made to fit Alex, and all of his gear, into the other vehicles. At this stage we were starting to realise we needed at least one more 4WD to help carry all of the supplies and runners.

We had a full day in Alice Springs where we picked up the rest of the runners and rearranged the vehicles so that all the supplies and runners would fit. We then headed to Lambert Centre to start the race on September 15th.

Once all the vehicles were full with fuel and 500L of water, we left Alice Springs and headed to Lambert Centre, 400 km away, arriving at about 4 pm on September 14th.

With 15 days between Lambert Centre and Birdsville, we had a lot of supplies to carry. Mount Dare was the only main stop between the start and finish line. I wasn't concerned about the food, however not all of the vehicles were carrying enough fuel or the required 120 litres of water. We did have extra fuel and water containers to make the trip, however the weight of each vehicle was a concern.

For the next 15 days, the routine was going to consist of getting out of bed at 5:30 am to prepare for the day ahead. Everyone was allocated a job to complete each day, whether it was the cooking, setting up, or packing up camp. Breaking down camp was a little bit harder as there were 22 tents, sleeping mats, tables, chairs, and a generator. There were also three shade tents for the command post, kitchen, and first aid station to pack up. Once the camp crew was ready at approximately 9:30 am to leave, they would drive 44 km to the next designated campsite and set up. By this time it was midday and it was very hard working under the hot sun to ensure that everything was set up for when the runners arrived.

The plan was to have the first car leave with the marker poles that were required to be placed every 1 km. These markers indicated to the runners the path they must follow. This first car left camp at 6:30 am, then 15 minutes later the second car would leave to set up the first check point at the 11 km mark, shortly followed by the third car for the 22 km check point. By this time it was 7:00 am and the runners would start the race while the remaining people would continue to pack up the camp.

Once the runners had stopped at the first check point for some supplies and water, the first check point vehicle would pack up and start driving to the third check point 22 km away and set up again.

On most days, the runners would complete their 44 km run in four to five hours. However as the race continued onto the softer sand, the runners were slowing down. It was amazing to see how fit these people were considering that they were running in hot and sandy conditions.

After doing this for three or four days, we were all starting to get into a routine. By the time we got to Mt Dare it was clear that we would not be able to carry all of the required water and fuel to get across the Simpson to Birdsville. Each day the runners were drinking seven to ten litres of water, and the support crew were each drinking up to three litres of water. There were also water requirements for cooking and washing up. Our water requirements were approximately 100 litres per day multiplied by eleven days from Mount Dare to Birdsville, totaling 1100 litres of water plus the extra fuel that some of the 4WDs were not carrying. Thankfully we arranged with the Mt Dare Homestead that they would provide water, fuel, and supplies at the Colson Track on day eight of the race.

By the time we arrived at Dalhousie Springs, things were really starting to work out. Everyone was enjoying the trip, we all had our jobs, and we were completing them efficiently. The runners were enjoying the race and really liked the way the support crew worked to look after their requirements. We were even lucky enough to have a swim at the Dalhousie hot springs.

On the morning of day eight, Mt Dare had contacted us by radio. They were passing us via the Rig Road to meet us at the campsite at the intersection of the French Line and Colson Track. We arrived there at 11:30 am and relaxed while they unloaded the supplies, finally leaving us at 2:00 pm.

As usual, the runners started arriving about 1:00 pm. Now that we had hit the sand dunes they were starting to slow down significantly. Once at camp, a Nissan travelling from Birdsville informed us that there were small fires forming north of Poeppel Corner, but the National Park was still open and there was no need to be concerned. This message was relayed to Chris who in turn phoned the Birdsville Police. The Queensland Police informed us that the park was still open but would advise the Northern Territory Police of our details and if things changed, they would be in contact with our party via the satellite phone.
As Chris was informing the runners and crew of the issue of the fires four days away, he received a phone call from the Northern Territory Police advising us that the National Park was now closed due to the fires and we were to exit the National Park and head back to Mt Dare.

The race was now cancelled. Everyone was very disappointed but we knew it was the right thing to do, especially after fires in the Kimberley’s had taken the lives of several marathon runners earlier in the year.

At this stage, we had to remove most of the supplies and camping gear out of the vehicles to make room for the seven runners. There were a lot of supplies, water, and fuel piled up next to the track. This included all of the supplies Mt Dare had dropped off two hours earlier.

It was now 4 pm, so we decided to drive back to Purni Bore and camp there for the night before proceeding to Mt Dare and then back to Alice Springs. After fitting all of the passengers in, we were only able to take the sleeping mats. It was a long day and we arrived at Purni Bore in the dark at around 9 pm. With most of the food supplies left on the side of the track, everyone found what they could in their cars for a late dinner. Some found dried fruit that the runners were eating at the checkpoints; I was lucky enough to have two Tim Tams and a cup of coffee. That evening, most people were able to contact their family via the satellite phones. We informed them that we were safe and that everyone was heading back to Alice Springs.

The following morning we were back in the cars, and over the next two days we made our way to Alice Springs, stopping at Mt Dare overnight where everyone enjoyed a hot shower and lovely dinner along with a cold drink. At this stage, the reality was setting in that the runners would not be making it to Birdsville. This was a great disappointment for everyone.

The following day we all packed up, except for Chris and Barry who were going to remain at Mt Dare and wait until the national park was open again to recover the supplies, water, and fuel now piled up next to the track.
Driving out of Mt Dare, along the track the runners had travelled on just days before, it became very clear how far they had actually run. It was an extremely long distance – over 350 km.

Once everyone was at Alice Springs, most people went their separate ways. We helped out with arranging airfares and transport to the airport for some of the runners and ended up staying in Alice Springs to rest for two days.

The TLCC members and the medical team crew decided to drive to Birdsville, via the Plenty Highway, as most had not been to Birdsville before.

Leaving Alice Springs and heading north, there were bush fires burning on the side of the highway. We were also informed that the National Park was still closed due to the fires at Poeppel Corner.

We took two days to drive to Birdsville, with 95% being on good dirt roads via Boulia, and camping in the bush by the side of the road overnight.

You wouldn’t believe that we went from fires to rain when we arrived in Birdsville that day, so we decided to stay in the cabins at the caravan park and to drive out to Big Red the following morning. It was off to the Birdsville Pub for their famous pub meals and a drink before retiring for the night.

The following morning it wasn’t raining, however the track out to Big Red was very wet and muddy. We came across a detour sign and took that track, however it seemed to be taking us in the wrong direction and was very muddy. The decision was made to drive back to Birdsville and ask at the Information Centre what the story was with the detour and tracks. As it worked out, we were on the correct track, however the road was closed due to the rain. After travelling over 1100 km, we still missed out in seeing Big Red. We were informed at the Information Center that the eastern side of Big Red is in flood and the road to Big Red has a 50 km detour. Nevertheless, due to the rain the road was closed until further notice.

So that’s the end to our trip to Birdsville. After having a meat pie with sauce for tea at the bakery, we headed to the Birdsville Hotel for a final drink before making our way to Sydney. We were planning on driving home via Innamincka and Cameron Corner, however the roads were closed due to the floods. We decided to go home via the Birdsville Track, Marree, Flinders Rangers, Peterborough, and Broken Hill.

Dennis Northcott