

a temporary one. "At the time, it wasn't a huge deal. We'd been travelling with friends and we'd all been using [the short-range] UHF. We could sort of communicate using the [temporary HF] radio but it would need to be repaired once we got home," he says.

Rick and Steve looked at the broken engine and could see fairly quickly it was beyond their abilities to fix. "So, we called [using the HF radio] the Birdsville Roadhouse to request a recovery, but when we gave our GPS location Birdsville told us we were closer to Mt Dare and referred us to them," Rick says.

Rick contacted the Mt Dare Hotel, which also runs a recovery service, but the static from the damaged aerial made communications difficult and voices were barely audible. Finally they managed to convey the essential details. The adults crowded around the radio, straining their ears, and eventually the words "truck", "coming", and "Sunday" made it back through the staticky void. Today was Friday.

Relief, followed by fear, bubbled up at the news. The Sheltons had left Mt Dare with enough supplies to last the four-day crossing, and plenty of water in reserve in case of emergencies. But their large aluminium container stored underneath the trailer had burst on the rough roads and 110 litres of water had poured onto the red sand. They still had about 84 litres in the car; with careful rationing of around three litres a person a day, it would last the family until Sun-

day. Rick and Hazel had about 60 litres in their vehicle. If the truck wasn't arriving until Sunday they would all have to stretch their supplies an additional two days for the journey out of the desert. Skye was worried.

The stranded family and their two companions needed better communications with the outside world in order to convey how low their provisions were and to ask the recovery truck to bring additional supplies to get them through the two-day journey to Birdsville. Their options were limited. Either Rick and Hazel would have to leave, possibly going back to Mt Dare to coordinate the recovery, or they would all have to sit tight and wait for a passing motorist with water to spare. Rick was determined to stay with the stranded group. "You can't leave someone in that predicament on their own," he says. "Without us they had no hope. So, you know, it wasn't a hard decision to say we'll stay, we'll get them out of here, even if it meant tying them on to the roof rack and carting them out. You just couldn't go and leave them there."

The group settled in for the night, setting up camp close to the track so they wouldn't miss any tourists driving through. None did.

Rick, a former secretary of the HF Radio Club, one of the largest radio clubs in the country, was able to "radio telephone" the club's vice-president, Jacqui Deering, in Adelaide. "It's one of the mysteries of long-distance radio

communication," he says. "I couldn't get a message through to Mt Dare, just 240km away, but I could get a better line of communication to Adelaide, some 1500km away. It wasn't all that clear either, but it allowed us to come up with the next solution." Deering called another HF radio club member in Wagga Wagga, Larry Beasley, who was able to provide the missing link in the communications chain. Messages were passed from the stranded group to Beasley, who would relay them to the female operator at Mt Dare. It wasn't perfect but it was better than nothing.

Once the link was established, the first message to come from Mt Dare was that they would need the name and address of the stranded family, their phone number and email address, the make and model of their vehicle, and their credit card details before a recovery truck could be sent out. Mt Dare wanted an initial payment of \$5000 before beginning the recovery. Whether it was due to the poor quality of the radio reception, or the messages simply getting garbled along the way, the Sheltons claim they were unaware that payment was required up-front. "We thought they wanted to know this stuff so they could send us the bill," Steve says. "We got the message, 'The credit card has been declined. What are you going to do?' Not, 'We're still coming' but 'What are you going to do?'" Steve says.

Suddenly their rescue was in doubt. For a family stranded in the desert, the idea that rescuers would only come once a significant sum of money was paid – money that was not readily available – was devastating. The problem highlights the reality of life on the edge of the desert. The Mt Dare recovery service is not free and providing it is an expensive business. Birdsville police officer Senior Constable Stephan Pursell says about 10,000 to 15,000 tourists cross the desert every tourist season and the number of breakdowns is high. "You would probably have no idea how many times [the recovery vehicles] would go back and forwards [for] the breakdown service, whether they're doing repairs out there or putting them on trucks [to tow back to the workshop]. It's a regular occurrence," he says.

Mt Dare Hotel owner and operator Graham Scott says they conduct about 20 to 25 recoveries a season, adding that the bill for recovery varies according to the complexity of the job. "We're seeing more and more camper trailers coming through the desert. That means if they're towing a camper trailer we have to take two trucks out there to bring them back, and that can put the cost into the thousands," he explains.

