

Chris Le Page, who operates the Kulgera Roadhouse and a similar recovery service west of Mt Dare, confirms the difficulties of operating such a service. "Driving through the desert is really hard on your vehicles. Your suspension, your tyres, your engine," he says. "There's a high cost to living out here that people generally don't understand."

Out in the desert, with a declined credit card and four children, Steve and Skye turned to their parents, hoping that between them they could cobble the money together. "I got a message to my parents that we needed help," Steve says. "We eventually received a message late that day that they could pay \$3000." The stranded group was optimistic that they now had enough money for the rescue to go ahead on Sunday.

Saturday passed slowly. The Sheltons erected a small gazebo to give the group of eight some shade. As the sun inched across the sky, everyone shuffled along, chasing the square of shade across the sand. "We spent the time trying to keep the kids entertained quietly. I can't tell you how many games of noughts and crosses the kids played with Rick. Hazel got a lot of knitting done," Skye says.

Everyone was counting down the hours until the Mt Dare recovery truck's expected arrival on Sunday afternoon. But on Saturday afternoon Larry Beasley radioed with more bad news. "Mt Dare advised me they weren't going to be able to make it on Sunday. I had to tell [the stranded group] that the truck wasn't coming until Monday," Beasley tells me. "Mt Dare told me they couldn't come because they were fixing a truck." The group didn't know it at the time, but in a stroke of unusually bad luck both of Mt Dare's recovery vehicles were inoperable.

By now, their supplies were getting quite low. Rick contacted his friend, former HF Radio Club president Geoff Hurst, in NSW's Hunter Valley. "I said to him that it might be time to alert the authorities that there was a situation unfolding in the desert," Rick says. "That's when he said to me, 'Larry and I have had that conversation and we're worried too, so we've already contacted the South Australian police.' We just wanted them to be aware that there was a situation out in the desert and it could become perilous. We weren't asking for rescue at that stage."

Rick radioed Beasley and asked him to communicate the seriousness of the situation to Mt Dare; he felt as though they didn't understand that supplies were getting low. At the same time,

Steve's mother, Ann Shelton, was calling Mt Dare to inquire about her family, speaking to a woman who had been communicating with the stranded travellers. Ann says she received an unsympathetic response in an exchange that left her shaken. "That night I was sitting up at 3.30 in the morning just sobbing my heart out, knowing the little ones were out in the desert," she says, still haunted by the memory.

Meanwhile, back on the French Line, Rick's concerns grew. Sunday passed as slowly as Saturday. Flies swarmed the encampment and the adults struggled to keep the children distracted. "We'd been in the desert for two days and hadn't seen a single passing vehicle," Rick says.

In fact, they wouldn't see another soul on the French Line until Monday – three days after breaking down – when Mt Dare sent provisions and a satellite phone out with some travelling New Zealanders. "We were so happy to see them come over the hill," Skye says. "I think the kids saw them first and they called out, 'Look, here they are!'"

But euphoria quickly turned to disappointment. The Kiwis had brought just four litres of water for the eight people in the desert, along with two loaves of bread, one packet of cornflakes, one packet of sausages and two tins of baked beans. Senior Constable Pursell says it's recommended that people take six to seven litres of water per person per day into the desert.

Chris Le Page, from the Kulgera Roadhouse,

confirms he and his team had been trying to source parts for the Mt Dare recovery trucks. "It was really unfortunate and a bad bit of luck that both of [Mt Dare's] trucks were out of commission," he says, revealing that one had been hit at speed by another vehicle and the other needed a replacement part. "In the end, we couldn't get their trucks running but we were able to send two mechanics to help out," he says.

It is a day's drive from Kulgera to Mt Dare and at least another two days' drive from Mt Dare to the breakdown point. The mechanics were expected to arrive on Tuesday, according to the Kiwi travellers. "Finally, we had some real information and some positive news," Skye says. The group was hopeful that their desert nightmare would soon come to an end.

Radio operators Larry Beasley and Geoff Hurst had contacted the South Australian police twice, conscious that the situation could turn in a heartbeat. Senior Constable Pursell confirms that he received a call from the Port Augusta police asking for an update on the situation. "I called Mt Dare and spoke to them, and I was confident the situation was in hand. They were sending food and water and a sat phone out to the group," he says.

The much-needed satellite phone ensured the group could now get clear messages to their rescuers. Skye and Steve called their parents to let them know they were OK, and they hoped there would be a recovery the following day.

Safe: Steve and Skye Shelton with their children

