

Day five in the desert, Tuesday, late afternoon: over the crest of the next dune appeared two Nissan Patrols, driven by mechanics Graeme and Tony from Kulgera. "G'day," they both said. It was a euphoric moment for the group; 120 litres of water was unloaded and the pair immediately got to work on the engine.

"These mechanics are highly skilled and highly trained," says Chris Le Page, their boss. "One of them has worked in the Antarctic. They're not [the types] who need a computer and a diagnostic machine to tell them what's wrong, these guys are problem-solvers." Such expertise doesn't come cheap. The bill for recovering the Sheltons exceeded \$10,000. The two mechanics were away from home for a week and a half. On the way to the breakdown one of their recovery vehicles suffered a broken shock absorber, a shredded tyre, steering column problems and damage to the fuel tank.

It took the mechanics about four hours to find the problem with the Sheltons' vehicle: a sensor in the timing mechanism was broken. They fashioned a replacement and hammered it into place. "When I sat in the driver's seat and turned the key, I was pretty nervous," Steve admits. Everybody held their breath. The engine caught and roared to life. Everybody cheered.

Another group had passed through earlier that day, sharing water and a few beers around the camp. Now, as the sun was setting on day five, everyone toasted the rescuers. The two mechanics, four New Zealanders and two grey nomads all shared the Sheltons' final night on the French Line. The six had grown to 14 people.

On Wednesday, they packed up and began the two-day journey to Birdsville, travelling in convoy. The mechanics stayed with the group for 50km or so to ensure the vehicle was running smoothly before peeling off and turning back towards Kulgera. The Sheltons, along with Rick and Hazel, rolled into Birdsville late on Thursday, September 13, almost a week after breaking down.

Since their perilous experience in the desert, the Sheltons have been labelled irresponsible by the operator of the Mt Dare Hotel. "They should never have been out there," Graham Scott says bluntly. He argues they were under-prepared, with insufficient supplies and no contingency plan should anything go wrong. The Sheltons counter that they are experienced four-wheel drivers with thousands of kilometres of travel



Waiting game: at camp in the desert

under their belt. They researched the track and the conditions. Steve has rebuilt his own V8 engine in the shed at home and is very capable with engines. They left Mt Dare with plenty of provisions and had taken advice from other travellers that a UHF radio was sufficient to communicate with other travellers who were sure to be on the same route.

Rick confirms the family did everything right, although he agrees with Scott and Senior Constable Pursell that they should have had a satellite phone or an HF radio. "The issue is that the recovery kept getting prolonged," Rick says. "They had enough water to last them until Sunday, but when the rescuers said Sunday, then Monday, then Tuesday, well, it understandably became a very tense, very fraught situation. Mt Dare should have immediately advised us that they couldn't carry out a recovery." Knowing that both Mt Dare's recovery trucks were out of commission would have freed the group to seek a new solution.

Graham Scott, who was away from the hotel until the Sunday, won't explain why the group was told help was coming on Sunday, then Monday, then Tuesday, other than to say "everyone did their best". He also believes that if you can't fund a recovery you have no business going into the desert, saying he's never rescued someone from the desert without payment first. "Well, put it this way, we've always got payment [up front]. If they don't have enough money for a recovery they shouldn't go out there," he says.

Kulgera Roadhouse owner Chris Le Page and Birdsville Roadhouse owner Peter Barnes say they operate a little differently; they will rescue people

before presenting them with the bill. When what would happen if someone couldn't their recovery, Senior Constable Pursell says police or emergency services would go. "I would be left out there; that would never happen," he says, adding: "But we would only be getting people, not the vehicles."

Since the tragedy of the young family perished north of Alice Springs earlier this month, he agrees that satellite phones should be mandatory for anyone who travels in the desert. "I would say yes, from my point of view. It's something we've been talking about in recent months following the recent tragedies on the other side of Alice Springs," he says. "With a satellite phone you can communicate." Without one, you can't.

The Birdsville Roadhouse is on the main road. Barnes has been recovering people from the desert since 1985 and he admits he's now getting too old and refers a lot of the recovery work to someone who does not want to run a recovery service. It's hard to think of any other area of Australian life where private enterprise provides such a vital service.

Senior Constable Pursell won't entertain the notion that the Birdsville recovery service will always be there. "It's just not possible. We absolutely need that service," he says. "I don't know what would happen, but it must continue." But it's such a vital service, is it too important to leave in the hands of private business? Should governments regulate the commercial nature of saving people in the desert?

With more than 15,000 tourists expected to traverse the French Line next year, breakdowns will continue to happen. How many of those people will have \$10,000 at their disposal? "From an education point of view it would be good if people were aware of the risks and were properly prepared," Pursell says. He says those preparations should include taking a satellite phone and an emergency radio beacon, packing enough food and water for double the length of time you expect to be travelling, and notifying family members of your expected arrival date. And, of course, the resources to fund a recovery in a worst-case scenario.

Back in the living room at home, a week after their return, Skye's brow furrows. "I woke up the other night and needed to go to the toilet. But I didn't want to get out of bed because I was afraid the dingoes would get me." Steve squeezes her shoulder. Skye wipes away tears, still haunted by the traumatic week in the desert that could so easily have turned into tragedy. ●