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## REPORT: TROJAN'S TREK SOUTH AUSTRALIA APRIL 2021

*"No-one can ever take away what this course has provided for me." Trekker 2021*

### Introduction

1. Trojan's Trek in South Australia (SA) was conducted on Moolooloo Station in the North Flinders Ranges from 17 to 23 April 2021. This was the 13th year treks have been conducted in SA. The remote location supports one of the key elements of success of the program; a peaceful setting in an ancient land, free from electronic, mental and physical distractions. This significantly increases the impact of the messages delivered.

2. The Trek was advertised specifically for first responders such as volunteer firefighters, ambulance officers and police officers who have been exposed to traumatic situations in the line of their duties. It is the second time a trek targeting first responders has been conducted by the Foundation. This was a change in approach to the normal practice when first responders are taken more by exception. All nominations were accepted.

3. Twelve males and two females attended. Of the total, seven were police officers, four firefighters, one paramedic and two ex-military attended. A new base camp team of three was given the responsibility for base domestic and cooking duties. They performed well.

### Aim

4. The aim of Trojan's Trek is to provide a setting and conditions under which participants experience a lasting, and positive shift in personal values and interpersonal relationships.

### Objectives

5. The objectives of the trek are to assist the participants through group and individual challenge, achieve the following:

- a. an understanding of how thoughts and feelings influence behaviour,
- b. exposure to various strategies which will bring about positive change,
- c. individual responses which are effective in achieving goals,
- d. improve interpersonal relationships, and
- e. enhance self-esteem.



### Validation

6. This trek saw a new system of evaluation introduced as a pilot called Goal Attainment Setting (GAS). The concept involves trekkers setting their own goals and also setting enabling goals to achieve the outcomes they want from life. Goal setting is important for recovery because it can **provide the individual with motivation**, particularly when they are functional and directly relate to real life activities. A meaningful goal can maximise patient engagement and motivate a patient to participate in rehabilitation in order to achieve their goals. From initial feed-back it appears that goal setting is more useful to the trekkers than ticking boxes in four psychosocial instruments on three occasions to rate change, the method used previously.

7. This practice, recommended by VVCS in 09 was supposed to set the Foundation apart in terms of independent evaluation as the most effective peer outdoor support therapy (POST) in Australia and elsewhere. That objective was achieved over the past 13 years in spades, but without traction or even enquiries from those in the business who should be forensically looking at data and outcomes it was assessed as no longer useful.

8. Trekkers are encouraged to complete daily journals which, with agreement, are copied and used to measure qualitative gains as well as gaining insight into what sessions are well or otherwise received. The comments are powerful and provide extremely good feed-back as well as personal impact.

### COVID 19

9. Fortunately, COVID 19 was a lesser problem during this trek than it was in 2020. Social distancing and food handling were required to meet health advice standards but these were not onerous.

### Program Delivery

10. Success of the trek is built on the credibility and impact of the sessions delivered by facilitators. During this trek five experienced facilitators were employed to deliver fourteen formal sessions. Three of the facilitators were from inter-state. Three mentors were also used to reinforce the messages. When not engaged in delivery, the staff were utilised as mentors to the participants around the campfire and during 4WD vehicle movement. This interaction of staff with small groups of participants assists in building trust and reinforcing messages. The total number attending including base staff was 26. A total of 14 nights' accommodation was required before and following the trek to link with transport. Keswick Barracks through the Chief of Staff assisted with the provision of rooms. This arrangement is most satisfactory, economical and safe for vehicle parking.

11. All staff departed Adelaide for Moolooloo a day in advance of the participants. This provided additional opportunities for staff briefing and to consolidate content. The total attending was 26 as follows:

#### Participants 14

Appointment	Name
Commander	Eric Ford
Operations Director	Moose Dunlop OAM
Facilitator	Peter Keith
Facilitator	Lee Bailey
Facilitator	Phil Quin
Mentor	Roger Eichler
Mentor	Cess Glasspool
Mentor	Jeremy Collom
<b>Support Staff</b>	
Camp Boss	Mick Scaife
Chef	Colin Abel
General Hand	Lester Fynes
Paramedic	Greg Hallam

#### Staff 12

Service
SAPOL
SAPOL
SAPOL
SAPOL
VICPOL
NSWPOL
AFP
VICAMB
CFS
CFS
CFS
CFS
Ex RAN
Ex ARMY

### Location

12. The trek is supported from a base established at the shearers' quarters on Moolooloo which is 36 km north east of Parachilna on the Glass Gorge Road. The station occupies 1400 square kilometres of country which varies in type and relief from east to west. The distance to the area of the trek is 520 km from Adelaide.

Travelling this distance is time consuming and expensive in fuel, but the advantages in having no mobile telephone, television or radio reception more than offsets the disadvantages of travel. A trip of this duration also permits the participants to get to know each other en-route. The feedback from the participants on the travel and location is positive.

### **Medical Support**

13. The nearest fully equipped hospital was at Hawker, approximately 1.5 hours away. A satellite phone was on hand if the RFDS or medical advice was required. First line medical support was provided by a paramedic based with the team. First aid kits were also available and a number of the staff were qualified St John, Apply First Aid. An AED which was purchased as the result of a successful grant application and added to the medical capability. In terms of risk management, the longest exposure to the most serious risk was assessed as traffic accidents during the trip to and from Moolooloo. No medical issues arose.

### **Equipment and Vehicles**

14. All equipment was satisfactory. Six vehicles were hired from Complete Ute and Van at 50% discount and a 100 series Landcruiser and Hilux were loaned to the Foundation by Pioneer Tanks. This represents a significant saving in hiring costs. Two tyres, one from the trailer and one from a hire vehicle and one steel wheel from a hire Hi-Lux were damaged and were replaced.

15. A self-drive hire bus driven by two volunteers transported the trekkers to Moolooloo Station on Sunday. At the conclusion of the trek, staff and participants returned to Adelaide in the 4WD vehicles.

16. During the trek, the 4WD vehicles were used to travel between locations. This is in alignment with the program logic which utilises the small group environment of the vehicles to prompt further discussions and reflections on issues as they surface following the sessions. This has been found to be so successful that staff refers to this practice as mobile consulting rooms. It also affords the chance to mix different individuals and staff with an aim to maximize exposure to others' views. This has proved to be beneficial; many of the trekkers have remarked on the advantages of spending time in the company of a few individuals as opposed to a larger group.

### **Weather**

17. The weather was optimal for trek delivery with no temperature extremes apart from a manageable 6 degree morning. The North Flinders Ranges was experiencing a period without recent rain, so the creek beds were dry and the roads and tracks relatively stable. Some creeks showed the effects of flooding earlier in the year which changed the landscape and creek lines in places. 4WD travel to one location was avoided because of difficult crossings.

### **Communications**

18. Telephone. Mobile telephone coverage in the area is patchy or non-existent with the nearest service at Parachilna and Blinman. This trek, fixed line communications were not available at the shearers' quarters despite earlier requests to Telstra. Although the number was no longer connected or required by the previous owner, apparently the number is quarantined for several months. It appears the number and line will be available later in the year. A satellite telephone was available if an emergency arose. It was not required.

19. Radio. While in the bush UHF hand-held and vehicle mounted radios were used for communications on simplex. Duplex on Channel 3 was available in the area for contact at greater distances by UHF.

### Program

20. The program is reviewed regularly to ensure relevant content. The messages conveyed during the trek are related to relationships and understanding cognitive strategies for behavior management. A selection of topics including How the Brain Works, Leaving a Legacy, Victim to Warrior and Communications were delivered. The style and method of delivery, combined with the surroundings, make the messages much more powerful. This is further enhanced by the group sharing personal experiences.

21. Daily journals also provide useful insight into the power of the program and how the content is being understood by participants. The simple benefit gained from reconnecting with other sufferers cannot be overstated. This is in accordance with the philosophy of the trek which is based on shared first-hand experience.

22. Two new mentors were given the opportunity to continue to develop their skills assisted by experienced facilitators. This is essential for staff succession planning.



Lesson at Pendulum Well

23. All facilitators are selected from past participants. These are normally individuals who found the trek messages so powerful they decided or were invited to take the opportunity to assist in program delivery. Those who have accepted this responsibility describe their continuing gains from attendance by assisting in the transformation of the lives of others.

24. The tenor of the week is relaxed yet highly focused on outcomes. This comes as a surprise to most of the participants whose expectations are for a course run along military lines. This is the antithesis of the program.

25. For this trek a number of first responders were used as facilitators and mentors. The inclusion of staff other than ex-military provides a balance and different experience sets which identified with the trekkers. Sessions linked to this expertise provides advice and encouragement in a form which is perceived differently to that presented by the veterans.

### Journals

26. The use of a period set aside daily to complete individual journals has proved to be an important element for participants. The journals are used to record personal reflections on the various lessons of the day and the daily experience of the trek. This practice provides an opportunity to review and anchor the day's lessons.

27. Past trekkers have commented on the usefulness of this record of reflections as a reminder of the strategies and tools to use after the trek. With consent, the journals are de-identified and used to provide qualitative data to supplement the quantitative psychometric evaluation of the program.

### **Partners**

28. A Partner's Handbook was posted to each partner during the trek. It is designed to deliver three key outcomes;
- a. provide information regarding the trek and its intent,
  - b. provide the partners with some of the ideas and tools that the trekkers will be exposed to, and
  - c. encourage support for what may be new ideas and behaviours.

### **Staff Debrief**

29. A staff debrief was conducted at the conclusion of the trek to capture immediate feedback and comment. Individual feedback was provided to the staff. The comments will be reviewed by the Operations Director.

### **Program Viability**

30. The Trojan's Trek program is demand driven; that is, individuals approach the points of contact indicating a will to attend. This has worked well in SA where male numbers remain reasonably high but are diminishing. However, with the experience of this trek, the inclusion of first responders added to the pool of experiences and the younger age of some of the participants was beneficial. The inclusion of first responders is beneficial and does not detract from the outcomes. In any case, to ensure that the program remains viable and continues to provide support to veterans it is necessary to:

- a. continue to advertise the program, targeting those who need support,
- b. focus on those establishments which are central to the clinical treatment,
- c. convince the Department of Veterans' Affairs of the benefits offered, and
- d. ensure funding is available to offer the program at no cost to participants.

### **Finance**

31. Some food was provided through Mick who was trek chef. Approximately \$370 worth of bread, eggs and meat was donated. The costs for food and other consumables averaged \$25.70 per person per day. Dietary restrictions add to the cost. The donors have been acknowledged.
32. Sustainability of funding for the SA trek requires continual monitoring as SA funds are dependent on a number of irregular sources. Each October the Foundation raises funds through a major fundraising activity organized by Adelaide Exercise Physiology, the Veterans' Support Walk. This was not run in 2020 due to COVID but hopefully will be run this year.

### **Trek Delivery**

33. Participant numbers will continue to dictate the number and location of future treks offered. This will be assessed and adjusted as needed. The existence and efficacy of the trek anecdotally appears to be well known and understood among ex-service organizations (ESOs) and now among first responders.

### **Conclusion**

34. The isolation and serenity provided by the bush, and the live-in nature of the trek are powerful catalysts in conveying content with impact. The frank and disarming nature of trek staff creates an environment which facilitates honesty and openness from participants. This in turn aids self- management and recovery.
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35. The role modeling exhibited by the trek staff, coupled with the credibility of being surrounded by others with similar lived experience allows participants to talk openly. Commonly,



a paradigm shift occurs over the duration of the trek. Participants recognize and acknowledge past thoughts and behaviors and how they have contributed to their present situation. They then develop a clear sense of hope and self-efficacy, as the realization that other ways of coping are possible and achievable as evidenced by past trekkers.

36. Sustained by the opinion of strong anecdotal evidence and the qualitative feedback from the journals, the trek achieved the objectives. This was gained through the pursuit of the Foundation philosophy which is supported by the staff. The experience is intended as a circuit-breaker. Following the trek participants describe having a new understanding of their choices in thinking and behaviour, a shift in their world view.

37. As trekkers return to their daily routines, the challenge for them is to practice and consolidate the strategies learned within their existing support structures with the additional layer of support from past trekkers. They are provided with a “Trek Bible” which contains a brief on all the sessions covered during their time on the trek. Feedback is positive.

38. The follow-up support among trekkers is immediately evident by the setting up of closed pages of the trek’s social media accounts. This aspect of the experience is important if the impact of the trek is to be maximized. This group has established their own closed FB page.

39. The participants and staff believe that there is an ongoing role for programs of this nature for veterans (and others). The principles may also be applied to other vocations. The trek is unique and may not suit every veteran, but it is a valuable and effective adjunct to other treatment. The efficacy of peer-to-peer programs is now well established in academic literature.

40. Further information about the Foundation and trek is available on the web site at [www.trojanstrek.com](http://www.trojanstrek.com)

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17 May 2021

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