

Pedalpower across the Simpson

By MARGARET FINCH

It takes a special kind of courage to cycle across the Simpson Desert. Many would say, a special kind of stupidity!

As Bob Weir, an AOTC Technician at Haymarket Customer Operations, Sydney, sat on his bicycle looking at the desert spread out in front of him, he realised that all the people who had told him that he'd have to be mad to try to ride across it were probably right.

When Bob put his entry in for the 600 km Simpson Desert Classic, he was excited about the prospect of spending five days in the saddle in the toughest and most rugged cycle race in Australia, and possibly even winning.

Less than two years earlier, Bob had started cycling to lose weight and get fit. The hobby had become an obsession, as Bob entered cycling marathons that took him around Tasmania, from Sydney to Wollongong, from Mudgee to Sydney, and now across the Simpson Desert.

But as he lined up to start the race with 26 other hopefuls, it was a different story. Faced with the prospect of ploughing through 130 km of sand, over more than 700 sandhills in temperatures of up to 49 degrees, his enthusiasm faded. All he wanted to do was go home. His dreams of winning dissolved, and instead he aimed to get a medal for riding across the entire desert without being picked up by the support crews.

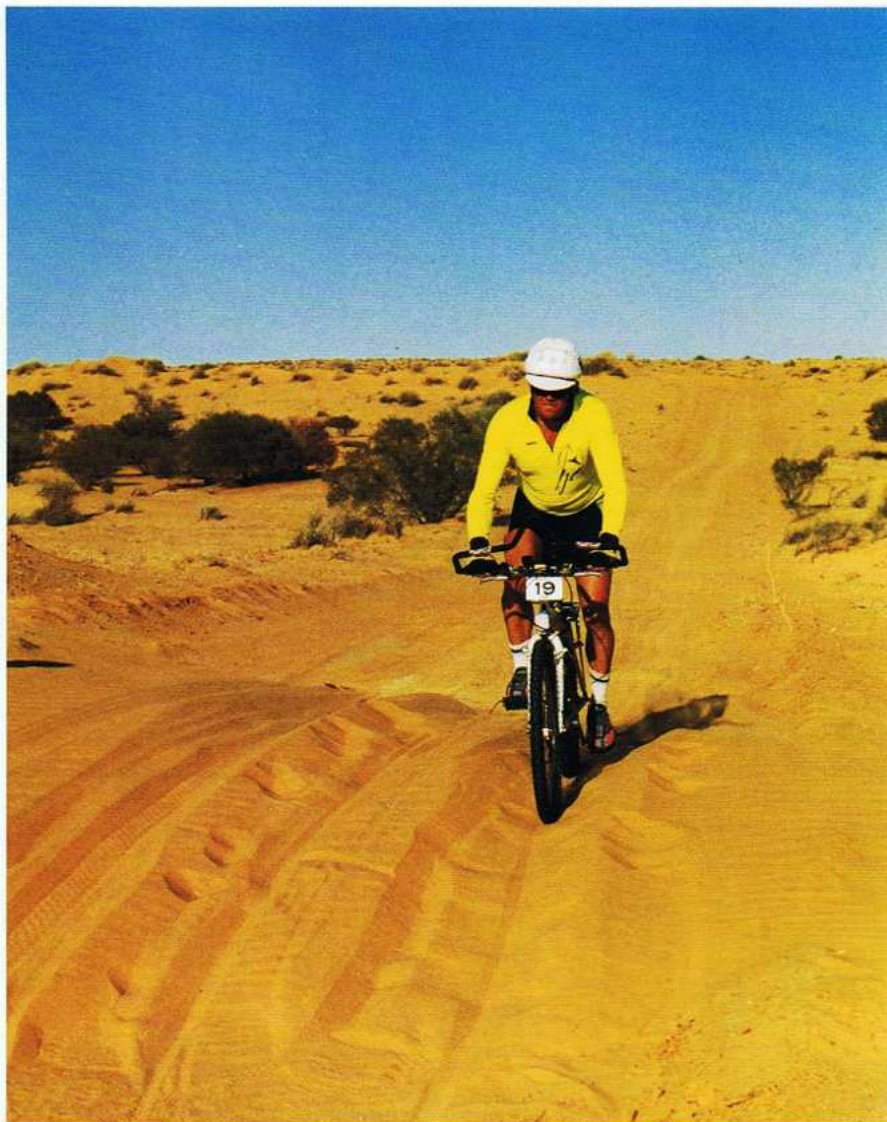
Soon after starting the race, his dreams changed again. All he wanted to do was survive. The clauses on the entry form about "death or injury" and "exposing his person to serious risk of grave injury" started to have new significance. All that went through his mind was "Never again", as he realised that he simply hadn't done enough training.

But he kept going.

Five days later, when the cyclists finished the race by riding into Birdsville together, Bob had cemented new friendships with the other riders and their crew as well as knocking himself out and gaining a suntan.

Twenty six people had finished the race, 10 without being picked up by support crews. Bob came last, but was proud of his achievement and proud to finish.

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Bob pedals through sand dunes. Photos courtesy Australian Cyclist magazine.



Birdsville at last!

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Wild stories about the race abound: there was the cyclist who rode 20 km with his bike seat broken off, the competitor who had an accident just before the race and went home at the end of the race to have his stitches removed, and the man who had been riding a mountain bike for only two months before the race started.

Telecom supported the race by providing an Iterra Satellite Earth Station which was set up every evening so that the competitors and crew could phone or fax home.

When the race was over, Bob swore that he'd never do it again. But sure enough, he changed his mind and he'll be back battling the Simpson again next time!