

Night out with the Sabrinas

by John Kubale

On the 28th of May 2008, five of us (Paul Brereton, Ray Warner, Ron Johnson, Ian Hutchinson and myself as leader) set out from the Nowra Visitors Centre in a single car, headed for Yalwal, the starting point for a visit to the Sabrinas (named after their resemblance to the busty blonde actress of the 1950's). We left the car at Yalwal at 9.45am and crossed the Danjera dam wall, turning south-west for 50 metres, before starting the haul up to the plateau through thick wattle. Towards the top Ron gave the first signs of breathlessness that was to prove our undoing at the end of the day.

We stopped for morning tea at 11.10am on the first rocks of the plateau, and then proceeded across the plateau to the point at GR575323 where we descended a gully (marked at the top with a cairn) towards the first Sabrina and Reynolds Saddle which is between the two. After a little difficulty finding access by a narrow chimney on the western side we had lunch at 1.30pm with excellent views from the northernmost point looking towards the second Sabrina.

After lunch we crossed Reynolds Saddle and climbed up the western side again to the northernmost point (with the large stone cairn that has started to collapse). We left at 2.30pm via a handy long split on the eastern side (with a drop of about 2 metres at the bottom). With sunset at about 5pm we knew that time would be tight to return to the parking spot. We set off almost due south through thick bush to avoid descending deeply into the top of Eureka Creek which has a rocky escarpment wall, then attempted to contour around the flatter area above.

Ron was showing more signs of breathlessness as we climbed out of Eureka Creek, and it worsened over the next hour. At about 4pm at GR590330 a message arrived on Paul's phone that showed we had mobile coverage, so he and Ray rang their wives to advise them of our probable late return. Despite trying to keep off the steeper slope under the plateau escarpment, we crossed numerous difficult gullies on the way to Clarke's Saddle which we rounded at about 4.45pm, high enough to see some of the large rocks which indicate the end of the plateau.

Close inspection of the map contours will show that there are two ridges leading north-east towards Snake Creek, before reaching the correct ridge leading towards the dam. As we descended the second of these we met large stones that told us we were on the wrong ridge, since we hadn't seen them on the way up. At this point, about GR333598 at about 5.30pm, the light was rapidly failing and as Ron's knees were also giving up a group decision was taken for some of us to spend the night out.

There was no mobile reception to alert others. We had two torches between the five of us, limited water, some food, three space blankets and some thermal tops. Paul and I looked at the ground between our ridge and the correct one but found it too difficult to consider moving the whole party. We also considered whether to climb back up the ridge in the hope of getting mobile phone reception from the top. However there was the double risk of finding no reception and losing our way back by torchlight.

I optimistically believed that Paul and I could reach the correct ridge and find the way back to the dam within about an hour, then drive to where we would get mobile coverage to inform our wives that we were okay, and the other wives that their husbands would not be home that night. We gave our spare food and space blankets to the remaining three - Ray, Ian and Ron - then Paul and I set off at 6pm. Ray had offered me spare batteries for my torch but I believed mine would last to see us down and thought the need would be greater for those staying out overnight. Serious error!

We found progress in the near darkness very slow, and after a while were not confident we were on the correct ridge. We may possibly even have crossed it. There was no moonlight. There seemed to be no correlation between the ground and the map contours. We aimed for a compass course to the south-east but found ourselves repeatedly forced eastward by the rough ground.

After 1½ hrs my torch was dimming and we had to consider sitting out the night where we were. Paul then remembered how to get the single LED in his mobile phone to work and in its dim illumination we had more confidence in proceeding. I led and Paul followed using the glare from Ron's mobile phone screen to help see the ground before him. We repeatedly got stuck in vines and arrived at hills and cliffs that still seemed to bear no relationship to the contours on the map.

Retrospectively it would appear we were in Cambridge Gully and our way to the south was blocked by a deep ravine we could not cross. After hearing water flowing we decided to descend towards it, hoping it was the outlet from the dam, and reconciling ourselves to crossing under the dam. We finally arrived at water-whitened stones with a small pool of water that I believed was the dam outlet (retrospectively GR613328).

We climbed the hill to the south hoping to cut through to the camping ground but arrived at another patch of water with the sound of water falling again. We could not work out the direction of flow until I climbed around a small cliff to shine the LED on a small waterfall. Hoping it was water flowing from the spillway of the dam, we climbed a small cliff and found our first real path for the day, leading about 100 metres to the gate where my car was parked. The time was 9.30pm and since leaving the others we had been moving for 3½ hours.

We drove almost to the junction where the Yalwal road meets the tarred road to Burrier before getting mobile reception and alerting club president Brett Davis and our wives.

Brett Davis takes up the story ...

After returning home from an excellent walk under the clifflines below Mt Bushwalker with 20 other walkers, my wife Karen and I were relaxing for the evening, expecting phone calls from the leaders of the three other walks in my capacity as temporary acting mid-weeks walks coordinator. Janice Walsh soon phoned (19 on her walk to Hyams Beach), and Sylvia Arthur phoned in shortly afterwards (17 on her walk from Kiama to Bombo).

We did not hear from John Kubale, but were not overly concerned, as we had learned who was on John's walk from people on our walk who had met at the Visitors Centre that morning, and knew that we would soon hear from concerned wives if there had been any problems on John's walk. If the group had been comprised solely of married couples i.e. with nobody waiting for them at home, we would have been more proactive.

At about 7:30pm we received the first phone call from Annette Brereton, who told us that Paul had called in earlier to say that he would probably be late home, but that he had still not returned. Karen rang Jenny Kubale, Glenys Warner and Vicki Hutchinson to see if they had heard anything, but none of them had heard anything since the afternoon phone calls. Karen and I then consulted the "Protocol for Overdue Walkers" page on the club website.

The police have responsibility for co-ordinating all search and rescue activities in New South Wales, so the protocol states - "If there is no news by about 9.00pm, the President will inform the police of the situation" - so we waited for further news or 9pm, whichever came first. 9pm came first, so I rang the Nowra police. They proceeded to ring Annette Brereton and Glenys Warner to get first hand information about exactly what had been said when their husbands had called, and said they would ring me back.

At 9:30pm the phone rang, but it was not the police, it was John Kubale. He and Paul Brereton were safely out, but three others were overnighting on the slopes to the east of Clarke Saddle. John told us that the three had ample food, adequate water and warm clothing, plus a space blanket each, and that although Ron had been having some difficulties during the day, and had been forced to stop at nightfall, he had been showing no signs of any major health problems when they had left. I agreed to meet John at Yalwal at dawn (6:30am), then rang Peter Dalton to request his assistance as well.

I then rang Vicki Hutchinson and Glenys Warner to let them know the situation, and I also rang the Nowra police, telling them of the change in the situation and letting them know that three Shoalhaven Bushwalkers would be going in the next morning to pick up the remainder of the group. The police said that they would put their response to the original emergency call on hold, but said to get in touch with them immediately if we needed further help the next day.

On Thursday morning I picked up Peter at 5:30am and we reached Yalwal at about 6:20am. John arrived five minutes later and the three of us were soon on our way, with the rising sun behind us. We chose a central spur for our ascent, hoping that if the three guys were walking out, they would either be on our spur or the ones to either side. After Peter blew his metal whistle apart, John and I blew our plastic whistles at regular intervals, occasionally calling out as well. The echoes off the nearby hillsides were impressive, with shouts taking about ten seconds to fully disappear. Unfortunately, there were no answering calls.

About two thirds of the way up the spur, however, our calls were answered. We quickly contoured our way around the steep slope, calling occasionally to make sure we were still going the right way. Five minutes later, and about an hour after leaving the cars, we met up with Ray, Ian and Ron. They had not moved from their overnight location as John had said that he would return for them in the morning. Luckily, the night had been surprisingly mild, with the temperature only getting down to about thirteen degrees, with no wind, rain or mist at all. The three guys were all in good health and good spirits, and after a few bites to eat and some coffee and tea, we set off for the cars.

Despite our best efforts, and with excellent visibility, it took us over an hour to get back, and even then we managed to follow a different spur which took us through occasionally dense scrub, vines, and thick wattle regrowth down to Yalwal Creek a few hundred metres downstream from the dam.

John took the three stop-outs back to their cars at the Visitors Centre, while Peter and I dropped into the Nowra Police Station to let them know that everything had been resolved successfully.

John Kubale continues with "Lessons learnt" –

Ron was only on his third walk with our club, though he had previous walking experience such as visiting the Castle, but he had suffered a heart attack six months previously. He had mentioned this to me in casual conversation just after crossing the dam, but I assumed he had made a complete recovery. He later confirmed he had been given advice by another club member that this walk was not onerous, though Ron had said he wanted to progress by careful stages.

When a leader suspects any member of a group is under stress, an early decision should be made to shorten or abandon the planned walk. Failure to do so may pose risks for all others in the group, as in this case. Equally, members should tell leaders prior to the walk if they have existing or potential health problems. **It is up to each walker to find out whether they are capable of completing the walk okay.**

On an out and back walk such as this, **it would have been wise to have calculated a turnaround time**, and stuck to it. It had taken us almost four hours to get to our lunch spot at 1:30pm. Although the return should have been quicker as it had more downhill, a similar amount of time would have gotten us back to the car after dark. Continuing our walk to the second Sabrina, and delaying the start of our return until 2:30pm ensured that we would arrive back at the cars at dusk at best, and left no time for unexpected contingencies - like being severely slowed down by an unfit walker.

Our experience of off-track walking in rough country at night with a small torch showed how pitifully slow going it can be. It took us over three hours to cover a distance of about one and a half kilometres. This underscores the requirement for each walker to **carry a torch and spare batteries on all walks**, even if there is only the slightest possibility of finishing in the dark.

Overnight conditions were extremely favourable. The night was dry and there was no rain, frost or heavy dew, and the three who remained had space blankets and did not get very cold, managing to sleep despite being on rough, rocky, sloping ground. They had matches but did not need a fire. Had conditions been worse, their survival equipment would have been inadequate. **Everyone should have carried matches, thermals - both top and bottom, wet weather gear as well as a space blanket.**

None of us had a GPS, so there was uncertainty as to exactly where the overnighting party had been left. Since the club owns more than one GPS, **it would be wise for leaders of all off-track walks to carry a GPS**, especially on walks where there are no nearby tracks to aim for.

Retrospectively, there was a considerable risk of Paul and I getting lost or hurt during the night descent. We had water but no extra food or space blankets. In this case the risk to ourselves probably outweighed the reassurance we planned to give to our wives. **It would therefore probably have been safer for the group to stay together.**

Another thought is that when there is a small group of walkers travelling in a single car to a remote area with no mobile coverage, such as at Yalwal or Yadboro Flat, a flat battery or other mechanical failure could cause a similar alarm to be raised. Having **two cars** would generally avoid this possibility.

And finally, given the off-track nature of the walk, the difficult navigation and its significant ascents and descents, **an early start** to give us more daylight to work with, should certainly have been a consideration.