

TYRE CARNAGE AT ERNEST GILES

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Despite magic scenery, challenging terrain and exhilarating 4WDing, Phil Bianchi and his crew were abandoned by the tyre gods.



"But there's no track out there," he said.
"There is now!" was our response.

I've always been intrigued by WA's remote Ernest Giles Range (EGR) located in trackless desert 240km northeast of Laverton. I've wondered what secrets it held.

Grasping an opportunity to visit the area, I led a group of 4WDs southward from near Carnegie Station down the Prenti Downs Road to Lake Wells.

Two ill-defined wheel ruts, trending south-easterly, made the going easy...until they petered out. We were then faced with 80km of cross country, our target being a gnamma hole located at the northern end of the EGR named by the indefatigable explorer, Frank Hann. Hann's Australian explorations were so

prolific he named over 500 geographical features in WA and others in NT and QLD.

Setting off, I thought: 'It couldn't be that difficult a job to cross a bit of gum and spinifex country with a few mulga belts, could it?'

DEFLATED

We made good progress, staying well east of Larry Wells Range, and had knocked off about 25% of our cross-country leg when we dropped onto a well-used mining track. It, however, trended away from the direction of the EGR, so the cross country continued. ►

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A bemused group of camels watched us bounce by. They weren't frightened by us at all, and I'm sure it was because we were the first vehicles they had ever seen.

By lunchtime we were about halfway to our target and rather pleased with ourselves.

The lunch break, however, allowed the tyre gods to catch up with us, and they served up a tyre-carnage thrashing with one vehicle getting six punctures, all in the sidewalls. Some punctures needed one plug and others a handful. It was almost 'how many tyre plugs to the kilometre'.

Watching our plug consumption ruefully during the rest of the day we continued on.

ONE EYE OPEN

By camp time we had travelled a breathtaking 10km since our lunch stop, with most of the time spent attending to tyres. We plugged heaps of punctures, had almost worn out a number of compressors and spirits were very low. To make matters worse we had not seen any half-reasonable camp spot which was devoid of vegetation since lunch time. Things looked grim, and having to dig out the dreaded spinifex to create a cleared area for camping would have been the last straw after the puncture bloodbath.

Then fortune smiled – or was it the tyre gods giving us a break?

A large cleared area, a claypan, appeared. What a stroke of luck!

To improve spirits further, firewood was everywhere and most of it the prized black gidgee, famous for producing magnificent cooking fires.



Boggy patches add to the adventure.

Camps were quickly set up and refreshments appeared, with the main topic of conversation being the carnage and how many tyre plugs were left. A stocktake of plugs and patches followed. Who expects to use so many tyre plugs on one trip?

As lead vehicle and the one with the greatest puncture risk, I took my stock of plugs to bed in case of raids.

HOOF BEATS

We poked our heads out of tents in the morning and saw three vehicles out of five listing severely due to slow-leak punctures.

Bugger.



It was out with the compressors and the ever-dwindling supply of plugs before heading off.

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Inquisitive locals.

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Rock holes mean life in the desert.

It was out with the compressors and the ever-dwindling supply of plugs before heading off.

The first 3km were through mulga so thick we almost needed our headlights on. If you haven't driven through thick mulga country, imagine a tall canopy of hard, dense trees, with dead roots and stumps having the sharpest and hardest of points imaginable in your path. That's mulga country.

You could almost see imaginary hands rubbing together with glee as the vehicles approached.

When we reached the range the country began to open up. Mulga was sparse and in patches easily driven around. However, calls over the radio reminded us of the ever-present tyre terror. 'I've got a flat,' said the caller. After five plugs and still no success they gave up and changed wheels.

Then another vehicle announced a flat tyre. That one needing three plugs.

I was starting to think the explorers of old – Hann, Giles and Forrest and company –were onto something by using horses and camels. No flats for them.

HARD TO FIND

With great relief and a degree of satisfaction we reached the northern end of the EGR and soon found Hann's corkwood gnamma hole of 20 February, 1908. Unfortunately it was dry. Nearby we found interesting cleared stone pathways and rocks stacked upon each other, presumably an old Aboriginal ceremonial area.

Heading southward along the range, our next target was Nellie Hayes Creek and Hann's rockhole. 'When full would hold some thousands of gallons', said Hann. We had to fight through spinifex as tall as the vehicles,



Aboriginal stone arrangement.

but it was better than the mulga belts.

At Nellie Hayes we spread out and walked many kilometres tracing creek lines looking for Hann's rockhole, all to no avail. It didn't look like rockhole country, leaving me to suspect the Nellie Hayes Creek on the map wasn't the same place as named by Hann. Nevertheless, it was a great feeling to be walking in pristine breakaway country with nature being the only noise.

SURPRISE

Travelling south along the top of the breakaway we could see the country far off to the east. At a few spots we managed to climb down from the top to investigate overhangs but didn't find any rockholes or art.

With one eye on ominous dark clouds we found a relatively clear site and set up camp. Rain showers throughout the evening ►



The challenge of cross country driving.

TYRE DISCUSSION

On a trip like this expect punctures and wrecked tyres. Treat tyres as a consumable, just as you do with fuel and servicing.

Some people say split rims with tough-as-nails crossply tyres are the way to go when cross-country driving, while others say tubeless are easily plugged and once pumped up you're on your way. It's a difficult one which borders on the 'Engel v Waeco' argument. I prefer tubeless.

Were the trip punctures the result of poor tyre selection? Poor driving? Differing wheel tracks? Lack of experience? Or bad luck?

It was probably a mixture of all of these.

I use Goodyear Wrangler MTR tyres. They are a tough tyre with kevlar in the sidewalls and are reasonably puncture-resistant. Goodyear offers pro-rata tyre insurance. If the tyre damage can't legally be repaired, Goodyear will repay the unused portion of the tyre. How can you beat that?

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An ancient sentinel keeping watch.



Driving through pristine Marble Gum country.



The joys of a campfire.

were’n’t heavy but were enough to spoil what would have been a terrific camp.

Trending southwards, a number of small but deep rock holes were discovered in an area of flat rock. One of our crew, blind sighted, almost dropped his Nissan’s rear left wheel into a deep hole. If he had he would have bottomed out to the chassis and the extraction would have been messy with serious damage.

Arriving at an area of predominantly red rock which featured unusual weathering, we found two fantastic gnamma holes that contrasted against the bright-red rock. Nearby were some Aboriginal stone pathways and piled rocks.

Another flat was announced, and this one needed six plugs, giving the driver the coveted Champion Plugger title for the trip. The tyre held air, so he elected to drive on it

until we reached roads that required speeds higher than 25kph. That way he didn’t need to risk a good tyre.

While that repair was underway, one of the crew checked his under-vehicle spare and found it had a puncture too. It was a new tyre that had never rolled on the road, and he was most unhappy.

That day’s puncture tally was five.

STILL AWESOME

As we neared the end of the EGR we found ourselves in open spinifex country dotted with large marble gums. What a majestic sight and what a relief. Soon we stumbled onto a cleared line which we followed westward to the Blaxland Range and Lake Wells Road, and from there we headed to Lake Wells Homestead.

The pastoralist was home. He knew of our trip, but asked: “Where did you guys come from?”

“From Ernest Giles Range,” we replied.

“But there’s no track out there,” he said.

“There is now!” was our response.

From there we made our way to the Great Central Road and Laverton for well-earned coffees and showers.

Excepting for the tyre carnage, what a terrific trip it had been through pristine desert country with fabulous scenery, lots of breakaways and creek lines to explore. ^{wtw}

TRIP FACTS

- Permits are required. The area is now under Native Title. Also apply to Prenti Downs and Lake Wells Stations for permission.
- Prepare and plan against the worst possible breakdowns. This trek traverses very isolated country. Be totally self-sufficient.
- Ensure your vehicle has been serviced and thoroughly checked over by an experienced 4WD centre, with a special emphasis on tyres, hoses and belts, radiator, battery cradles, roof racks, bull bars, the suspension including all bushes, shocks and springs. Two spare tyres are a must.
- Plan your fuel needs carefully. Expect double your normal consumption rate.
- Fix some shade cloth to the front of your vehicle to prevent radiator blockage by spinifex. Also stop frequently and clear any spinifex buildup under the vehicle to prevent fires.
- A HF radio, Sat phone or both are a must. There is no mobile phone coverage.
- High-clearance, diesel-engined 4WDs are preferred in this country. They have reduced spinifex-fire risk.
- This trip is not suitable for soft roaders or for towing camper trailers.

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Ominous dark clouds.