

Bec Weber, a teacher at Adelaide Botanic High School, was a participant of Operation Flinders when she was a student herself. This is her story.

OPERATION FLINDERS
ONE STEP AT A TIME



Operation Flinders is for losers?

What am I doing here on this crowded smelly bus full of fellow losers? How did I let myself get talked into this? It's 6:30 on a freezing winter's morning and I could be sleeping in my bed if it wasn't for this stupid Operation Flinders idea. I hate my parents and the school staff for encouraging me to participate in this crazy operation.

I wish I'd brought my smokes!

Now I am going to miss the parties and gossip, which is part of my usual weekend schedule, and be forced instead to endure this boring bus travel with people I don't even have the patience to talk to, and heading to some barren desert, God only knows where.

I hope we stop for a break soon, I'll have to bludge a smoke.

If you think the bus trip sounds hard, try stepping off into an alien landscape, to be ordered to stand single file behind a line drawn in the sand by some obnoxious, chauvinistic, domineering tin soldier. We felt that at any moment we were going to be frisked for our smokes and make up. Our luck was in however, no sniffer dogs today.

If only I had a 16mg to calm my nerves.

Waking up at some dark and freezing hour to find a soaking wet sleeping bag, is only the beginning of what were to be very long days of hard work. Everyday was the same daily routine. Pack up your bags, collect firewood, cook breakfast and clean up the campsite. It sounds simple enough but when you're in the Flinders, there are constant pressures that come with these simple daily routines. Your hands are burning from the freezing cold mornings, girls are fighting each other over who stole whose mess tins, and Dave our camp leader would prance around the campsite making sure the environment was left unharmed by our brief stay.

The world seemed to be on our side though when breakfast was ready. This was one of the only times we had to relax and devour every last morsel we were allowed. We needed it too, because there was not one day in which we walked less than six hours. From the moment we left the campsite in the early morning we would start our trekking across the beautiful Flinders Ranges. Richard Margetson from the ABC would follow along with his recorder, and capture conversations between team members. Most of the time however they were about smelly, blistered feet or how much everyone missed their boyfriends, who would come and go quicker than the blisters. We just hope Richard wasn't recording when our team sang songs from Grease! I reckon even the goats, kangaroos and bird life would have been scared off by the racket. When we sang our team song however, it was very mellifluous, and it was probably the only time Dave was happy to hear us all talking at once.

Gee I really need a smoke.

Each day brought a series of extremely challenging situations to tackle. From abseiling down sheer cliffs, to bush survival skills with some real bush characters. Aboriginal culture was explained to us by local Aboriginies, and we all developed a new respect for their way of life and the environment. On one of our rugged walks, Shirley's knee gave her some problems. The ambulance officer was called in and drove in to help those in pain. Everyone except Richard and Dave suddenly became a cripple when they saw the young and attractive ambulance officer. Or was it simply that he was the first real male we had seen for days? (sorry Dave and Richard). Grummet the toy monkey, and our team mascot, got the best end of the deal. He was carted around by each one of us in turn, and never sustained a blister or bruise for the entire eight days.

Lunch was always a rewarding experience. We would walk non-stop from breakfast time, to eventually reach a lunch spot which Dave was happy with. He wasn't stupid though. He knew exactly where to lead us. It was always the top of a huge steep hill, which took two hours to climb. At the top you would be surrounded by extraordinary scenery. The air would be fresher and for a few moments all the troubles in your life would be left behind in Adelaide. You would feel like a new person, capable of anything you put your mind too. Motivated and alive.

Who needs smokes anyway?

That euphoric feeling would soon disappear though, as Dave marched us back down the hills to our never-ending camp routine. Reaching camp at the end of the long and tiring day's walking set the scene for Dave to teach us many important lessons about ourselves, along with some great skills as well. Especially arranged team exercises made it obvious there was only one way to survive, and that was team co-operation. Without each other we had nothing but dry sand and jagged rocks. We also started to respect Dave rather than hate his authority over us. He actually did have a heart!

Gee a mars bar would go down well.

Night times in the Flinders are fantastic. Clear pollution-free skies means you can see stars you didn't know existed. No wonder the Aboriginal culture is so amazing, they've had all of this to themselves for thousands of years. Our favourite night-time activity was sitting around the campfire while Dave popped our blisters. One night a band-aid was removed and thrown into the campfire, trouble was it landed in the billy. The tea was good though!

Eight days of fantastic company, conversations, lessons and friendships. I don't want to go home!

Before we knew it was time to say goodbye to the magnificent countryside. We were all feeling very proud of ourselves. Channel Nine News and The Advertiser were waiting with Premier John Olsen to greet us back at base camp. We wanted the world to know we had walked 95km. Why not? Anyone would be proud of that achievement. Even though we had to leave our great adventure, the feeling of achievement as we boarded the bus to come home was even better than a truckload of Farmers Union Iced Coffee!

I will never forget the powerful feeling of success that overcame me as we drove out of the Flinders. Although dog tired, that day we all felt like we were walking on air. I could feel the excitement and satisfaction building within the team as we waited eagerly to share our experiences with those at home. We learned that teamwork is more rewarding than doing things for yourself. Friends are more important than we could have ever imagined. Thank you to all of the people who make Operation Flinders possible, and especially to Dave. Sponsors and organisers are to be congratulated. Thank you finally to team Tango 2 for helping me learn so much about myself and my strengths and weaknesses. None of us could have achieved this alone. We were fantastic weren't we! If only all young South Australians were able to participate it would be terrific.

If anyone was to ever tell us Operation Flinders was for losers again, our Tango 2 team would challenge them to an eight day walk any time.

Operation Flinders is for real winners.

Rebecca Paterson.

