



OT-150 TELEGRAMS No 20

Water, Water Everywhere

For three months, Northern Section work parties were trapped by rising flood waters

The wet season that swept in during December 1871 was both intense and prolonged, and it trapped Robert Patterson's OTL construction parties for over three months in their separate camps, isolated from each other and from the outside world, short of rations and unable to proceed with building the line.

The six encampments where the men and their animals endured the 1871/72 wet season were, and still are, obscure locations in the Top End landscape. Only one of them, Daly Waters, makes any kind of imprint on modern maps, with its permanent population of nine! The others, each host to between 35 and 80 men in their brief heyday, have unfortunately faded into obscurity.

To get a realistic picture of both the distances and their distribution, imagine the camps superimposed on a map of regional South Australia:

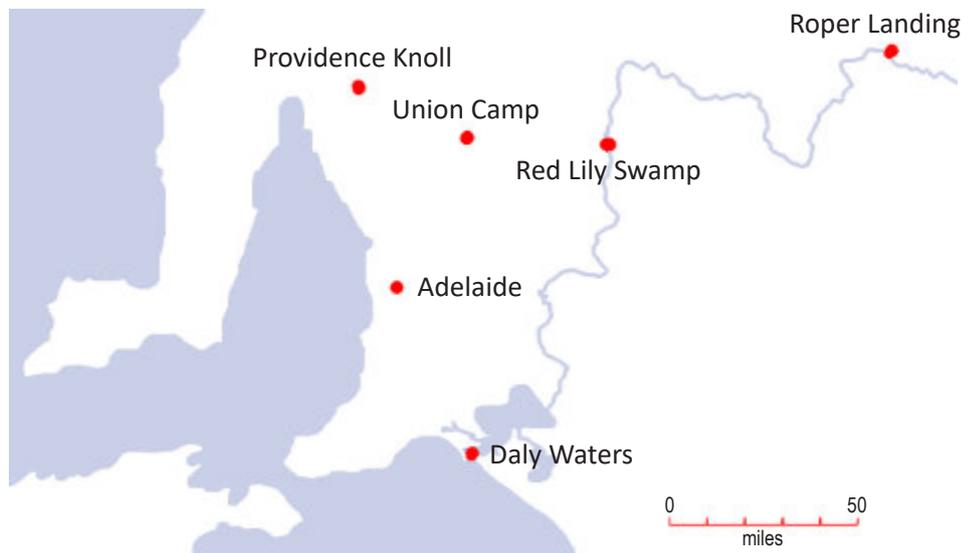
To the northwest is Balaklava (Walter Rutt's **Providence Knoll**). Centrally located 30 miles from Balaklava is Kapunda (George MacLachlan's **Union Camp**). 105 miles to its east is the dog-legged border with Victoria, beyond Renmark (Robert Patterson's **Roper Landing**). 25 miles east of Kapunda is Blanchetown on the Murray (Ralph Milner's **Red Lily Swamp**). And way to the south of all the others is the Murray mouth (Robert Burton's **Daly Waters**).

Providence Knoll, located between Bitter Springs (near Mataranka) and the King River, was a tiny piece of high ground that enabled Walter Rutt's 35 men to eke out an island existence for more than three months, completely surrounded by water. As Rutt later reported to Patterson:

... the country, which had been rapidly becoming boggy from the rains, was inundated, the flood coming upon me so suddenly that, although I instantly took



Above: "Mr Rutt's Camp, Providence Hill" (Originally known as Hungry Camp) [Sketch by Sidney Herbert, "The reminiscences of S W Herbert", SLSA, D 6995 (L), p115A]
Below: Northern Territory locations superimposed on a map of South Australia



measures to shift to a small rise [Providence Knoll] about ¼ of a mile distant from my camp, the removal was only accomplished by carrying the whole of the stores and equipage on the men's shoulders, they working for four days up to their waists in water. From the 3rd January till the 10th April 1872, I remained at Providence Knoll unable either to work or to shift camp. During the whole of this period the men were



A pen and brush sketch of the Providence Hill Camp by Sidney Herbert [SLSA, D 6995 (L), p116A]

on short rations and for the greater part of the time on half the usual scale, and the provisions were reduced to a fortnight's stock, when you brought me some temporary relief upon packhorses from the Roper ...¹

George McLachlan had mustered his own party near the junction of the Eley and Roper Rivers and had formed camp on a lagoon in the forest. When Bedford Hack's bullock train with desperately needed supplies arrived from Port Darwin in January after three months on the track, combined numbers in this camp swelled to as many as 80 men and 100 bullocks, and the name Union Camp was adopted to reflect the fact. Individuals were sometimes able to visit Providence Knoll from there, but the country was too waterlogged for any supplies to be taken across. Visitors to the Knoll reported that Rutt himself was recovering from a prolonged debilitating illness, but was still very weak. Several others of Rutt's party were very ill, and one man, Edward Privett, ultimately died. (See **Telegram 10, Casualties.**)

The Roper Landing, some seven miles downstream from the Roper, or Leichhardt's, Bar became the base of operations for Robert Patterson's second expedition, sent to complete the northern line after the first expedition under Darwent and Dalwood had fallen short and had no choice but to return to Adelaide. The Roper was the only camp with any contact from the outside world, and that only when Charles Todd arrived with three relief ships, men and horses in late January 1872. This was no immediate help for the other parties though, because even the packhorse party under Arthur Giles (one of Alfred Giles' brothers) and Stephen King Junior had to turn back only 7 miles out from the Landing after attempting to make their way west across the Roper bog with supplies six weeks later in mid-March 1872.²

Well south at Daly Waters, completely cut off from communication with all the other camps, was Robert Burton's party. They had been camped on the other side of the raging Birdum Creek when Alfred Giles and his small

party came by looking for them on 7 January 1872 but, despite hearing Giles' rifle shots from less than two miles away, Burton's men had been powerless to cross the flooded creek and were unable to make themselves heard over the wind.³

Meanwhile, quite independent of the great and scattered Government expedition, intrepid bushman Ralph Milner was driving the remainder of his four thousand flock of sheep north to Port Darwin and had reached Red Lily Swamp on the Roper River, right in the midst of the Government parties. He and his brother John and a small party of drovers had left Port Augusta way back in August 1870 and had made an epic journey across the continent.⁴ John Milner been murdered by an Aboriginal man en route and many of the sheep had died from eating poisonous *Gastrolobium* plants. Now Milner and his small party were also marooned by the floods and were unable to proceed further.

Coincidentally, a small party including Richard (Dick) Knuckey had arrived on horseback from the Central Sections just before Christmas 1871⁵ and, once up at Union Camp, he was able to move with some difficulty between there and Ralph Milner's sheep camp on Red Lily Swamp. Milner and his party had been living on mutton and water for weeks and were desperate to supplement their meagre diet with flour and sugar. Milner in concert with Knuckey made strenuous efforts to reach the Roper Landing for supplies but, despite two attempts, they were unable to cross the largest branch of the Strangways River and had to turn back. Alfred Giles wrote in his memoir, "Mr. Milner had the misfortune to see three of his horses swept away by the flood with all their packs and swags. The whole country along the Roper banks was inundated to a width of six miles."⁶ Milner had earlier sold a thousand of his remaining sheep and some horses to Patterson to support the expedition and the urgent task was to try to reach the outlying parties with these life-saving sources of fresh meat.



Sidney Herbert's sketch of the Daly Waters Depot [SLSA, D 6995 (L), p138A]

One of the big challenges was to get people and animals across the Elsey River which was also in flood. McLachlan's men under Willie Brock had constructed a small boat to get themselves across initially and later it was put to good use to transport the animals across:

On reaching the crossing place we found the Elsey more than half a mile wide. We took the packs off the horses, put them [the packs] in the boat, and sent them across, towing one horse behind the boat and driving the rest into the water.⁷

After a couple of attempts, they succeeded in getting the horses across but getting the sheep over several weeks later was more complicated. Alfred Giles rode down to No 1 Well and retrieved two coils of telegraph wire which he stretched across the Elsey between trees about three feet above the water. He then built yards on both sides of the river for the sheep:

I found the boat would only hold 11 at a time, and then only by packing them tightly in a sitting posture - in each other's arms as it were ... We had no oars, but one man stood in the end of the boat, and, catching hold of the strained wire, pulled the boat along.⁸

It took two days to get the sheep across.

When Giles's party eventually made it down to find Burton at Daly Waters and deliver the sheep, they received a hero's welcome:

We came upon Burton's party camped at his depot at Daly Waters. The whole camp [of 36 men] turned out, and gave us a most hearty welcome ... Rations [had been] cut down to the lowest ... The men, in order to eke out their rations, caught hundreds of small fish from the creek and waterholes ... The men were a cheerful and fine lot of fellows with the highest regard for their chief, Mr. Burton ... The news that I had 300

sheep within 30 miles was most gratifying to the poor fellows, and they actually took off their hats and cheered us. They had been subsisting for two months upon three pounds of flour [ie, half rations] to each man a week, and any fish or game they could catch. They had been without tea or coffee during that time, and were drinking a substitute made from split peas roasted and steeped in boiling water – they called it coffee – most abominable stuff we thought it. Notwithstanding the great hardships Mr. Burton had to contend with, he had constructed 16 miles of poles, and it favourably compared with any of the other parties ...⁹

Neither of the other construction parties had managed to do any better than Burton's before the wet set in and from then until mid-April there was virtually no progress for upwards of three months. When the ground finally dried out, the planned completion date was well past and the race was on to get the rest of the line built.

References

1. Diary of Walter Rutt, report to R C Patterson dated 5 November 1872, State Library SA, D 2575/178 (L)
2. Field Book of Stephen King Junior, entry for 13 March 1872, SLSA PRG 627/282, p98
3. Alfred Giles, 1926, *Exploring in the 'Seventies*, W K Thomas and Co, Adelaide, p139
4. Described in "Arthur C Ashwin's Recollections of Ralph Milner's Expedition from Kopperamanna to the Northern Territory with Sheep and Horses in 1870/71", *Proceedings of the SA Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia*, 1927, vol 32, pp47-93; Ashwin was a member of Milner's party
5. Giles, 22 December 1871, p118
6. Giles, 12 March 1872, p135
7. Giles, 19 January 1872, pp126, 127
8. Giles, 15 March 1872, p136
9. Giles, 28 March 1872, pp138-140