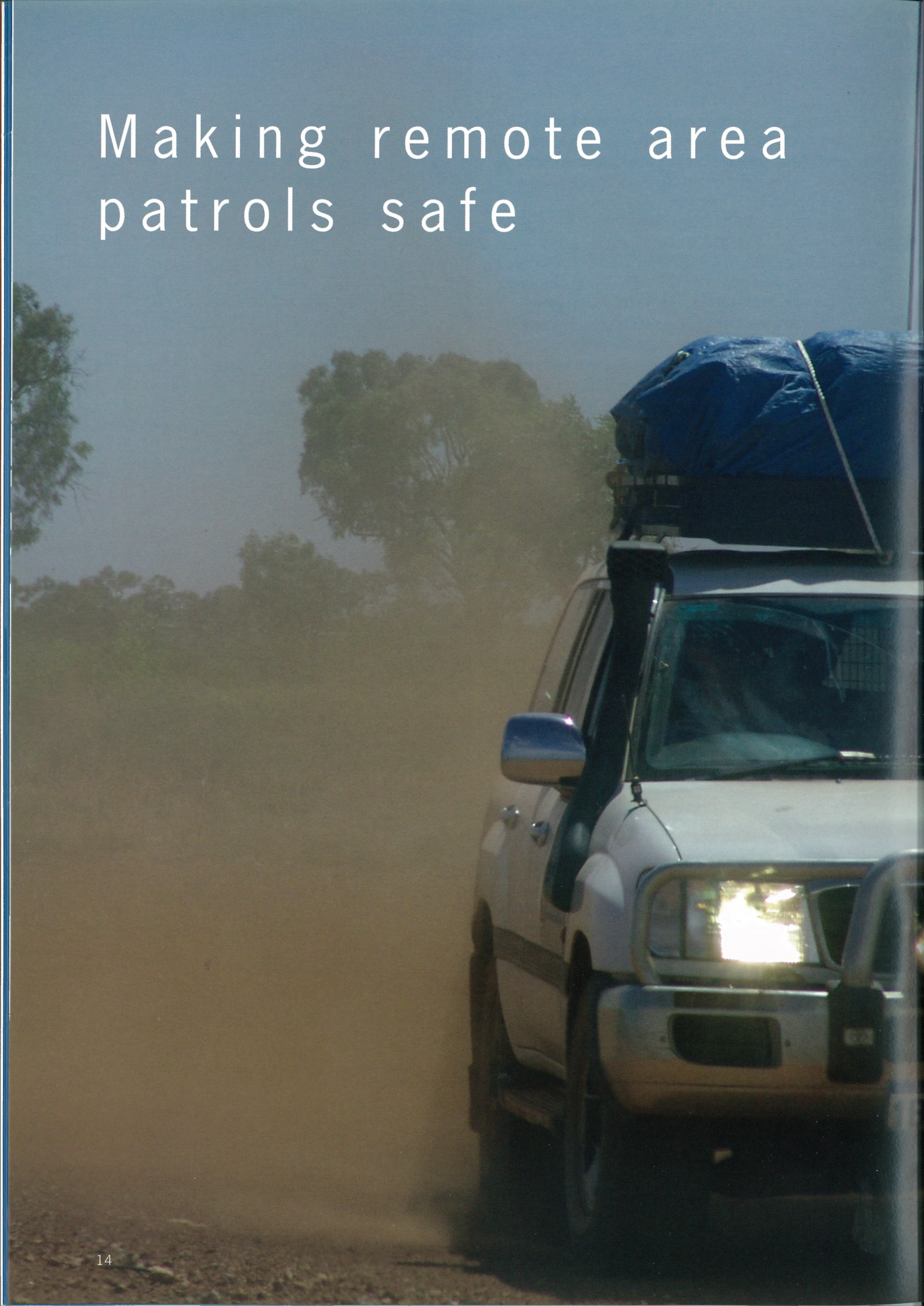


# Making remote area patrols safe





Six Customs officers from Western Australia took part in a remote area training course, conducted north of Perth. For five days they were assisted by instructors Helen Grant, Peter Lutley, Scott MacAulay and Mark Skeels who each put the group through their paces. Mark Skeels, who also did a spot of learning, kept a diary of what happened:

## MONDAY

Day one starts in the classroom. Many years of experience are on show (maybe too many) as the instructors make the fountains of their knowledge overflow. Twenty hours of instruction is somehow crammed into an eight-hour day after which the students try to work out why on earth they volunteered for this course.

Mountains of food for the remote section of the course are purchased and prepared for loading into the vehicles - along with even bigger mountains of camping gear.

## TUESDAY

There is much concern about a weather forecast that indicates storms and unpleasantness. Our weather guru does his best to allay the group's fears but, alas, he is unable to convince us of his meteorological prowess.

Everything is loaded into the four 4WD vehicles. Our group departs and heads north.

A few hours later we are at the last bakery we will see for a few days.

Shortly afterwards we are off the blacktop and on to the sandy, corrugated tracks. Two hundred metres further on and we stop for a flag-raising ceremony - a safety requirement so we can be seen in among the dunes and bushes.

We head over more sand and bumps to our home for the next three nights - a beautiful spot in the dunes.

With the wind assisting, our camp is constructed and lunch is taken. There are not too many flies. Maybe the wind is helping (some call it a gale while those who know just call it a sea breeze).

After settling in, we embark on a trek to test new-found navigating and walking skills.

So that's why you don't wear shorts to walk through the bush, some of the class think, as ticks and their removal become the topic of the moment. If you get them quick enough there isn't too much blood loss.

Some more instruction in navigation by foot and map reading and it's time to get ready for the night adventure. No one lost and only a couple of stumbles.

## WEDNESDAY

A very early awakening. After drying out the stuff soaked during the night's downpour, we are into an early breakfast and then a bit more learning.

It becomes apparent why we start so early - the flies come out to play 30 minutes after sunrise and, if you are still eating ... well, let's just say it becomes like moving sultanas on toast.

A bit of a talk about different aspects of remote operations and how to maintain your sanity when away from civilisation and then it's off to the beach.



Not all remote-area patrols are on beaches

On the beach in all its glory is a two-tonne 4WD resting in the sand. So that's what it looks like when you are bogged. Okay class - remove the spare tyre. It's stuck under the car. You're the instructor and you bogged it and you want me to dig it out! Sometimes there are good designs on vehicles and sometimes they just don't get it right. We now understand the reason behind removing the spare wheel from under the 4WD and mounting it elsewhere. With lots of shovelling out comes the spare wheel. More shovelling and we can see the other wheels. "Let the air out of the tyres and just drive out," the instructor says. After a bit of back and forwards motion, it does.



The next couple of hours are spent snatching and winching and digging and all the time that voice telling us - "don't get bogged in the first place".

After getting dirty and covered in sand (the sea breeze was back and even stronger) it was off to play in the sand hills and see what these 4WDs can actually do. Isn't an automatic 4WD easy to use? So quiet and, with eight cylinders, you don't need to do anything. Get into the manual 4WD. Rats! Now the need to actually drive the thing is apparent. Let's try not to get bogged.



Customs officers on remote area patrol in the Pilbara

A quick lunch and it's off for a drive around the place. Something called stall starting on hills is accomplished though not without some anxious looks. It just isn't normal to start your car still in gear without touching the clutch. It works. Some more driving down tracks that haven't seen a vehicle for a while. The sound of bushes and branches doing their best to rip open the sides is unnerving but the instructors just sit there and we keep on going. We don't get lost even though we don't all agree on our positions on the maps. Back into camp and time for the quad bike. Now, if we can just keep all four wheels on the ground.

Dinner is taken and now it is time for a night drive. With maps and GPS and compass and 4WD it is off to play in the dark. Doesn't seem quite as easy. Still no one is lost and we seem to actually get everything completed the correct way.

After a big day and with clear skies and no rain, we slip into an easy sleep.

## THURSDAY

Again an early rising. This time, however, the reason is clear and it's quick with brekkie and then into personal survival. Another little exercise is: guess the distance. Useful for all sorts of things when involved with remote ops (and some not so remote).

Now for the final event - 4WD/walk/hiding in the bush and a barbecue at the end. The walk is easy. The hiding in the bush is easy (it must be, the ticks do it all the time). Maybe work on our radio procedure a bit. Then, just like that, it's all over. During our debrief it starts to make sense and even the instructors are pleased at our progress.

## FRIDAY

Can't anyone sleep in? We didn't go to bed until midnight. Everything sort of packs back in and with a final goodbye (and class photo) it's off to the land of fresh-cooked bakeries and coffee.

Traffic lights and cars and the hustle and bustle and it's back into the grind of city life. It is cleanup and carwash time. Pack away ready for the next call out.

The course is competency-based and undertaken with the object of learning and accomplishing specific outcomes. If the knowledge and lessons imparted are followed we (the instructors) are sure all who complete the training will be able to carry out all remote-area duties safely.