

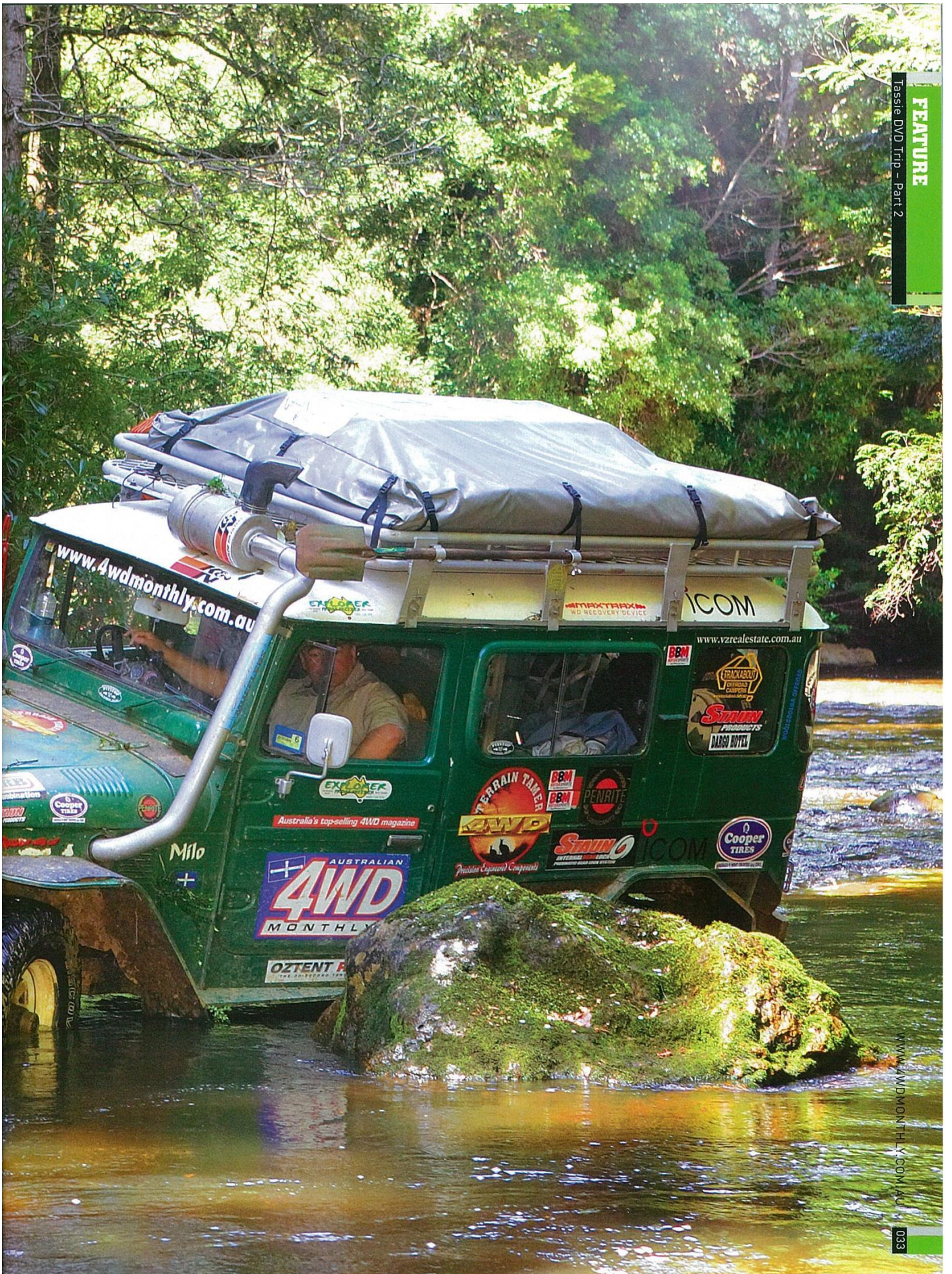
# 'STUCK ON THE MOUNTAIN' MEN

Tough? Nothing's too tough for us. Oh, damn...

WORDS BY JOHN ROTH PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEAN SUMMERS









Last month I told you all about our first few days in the wild west of Tasmania. It was hard enough crossing deep, fast-flowing rivers and winching up those slippery mud banks, but we were having it pretty easy.

It was a bit of an effort to get Jimbo's truck with the Outback Tray Topper through some steeper sections and its long overhang saw it stuck in more than one gully too. But Jim and Greg proved their point – the Tray Topper went places no trailer could, in style!

But Brian promised us some 'really tough stuff' and we kept egging him on. Then one morning, with Coz and Pete Holman planted firmly on each side like royal guards, Brian made a little announcement.

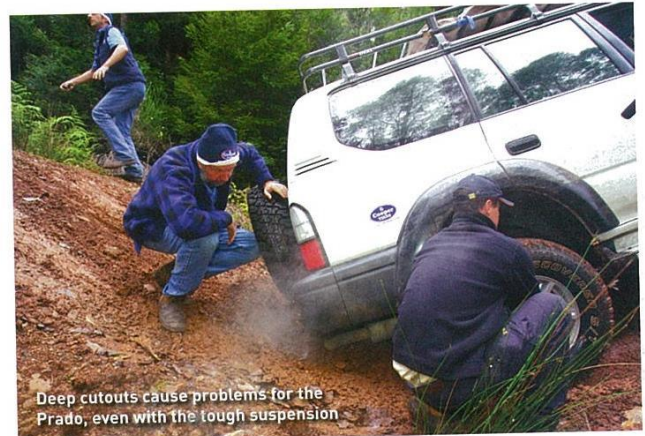
"Right cobbbers, there's one track we haven't driven yet. I don't think the trayback will make it Jimbo. In fact, it's going to be hard on the Prado too seeing as it hasn't got lockers. And Terry, unless you want to scratch the paint on the Patrol it might be worth leaving this one alone. With the extra length it'll be a tough ask."

Editor Glenn was driving the Prado, and in his expert hands it stayed pretty much intact – so far. With the Terrain Tamer suspension upgrade incorporating a 50mm lift, a set of Cooper STs and a Terrain Tamer winch up front, it was in a better position than the trayback but it wasn't Glenn's call.

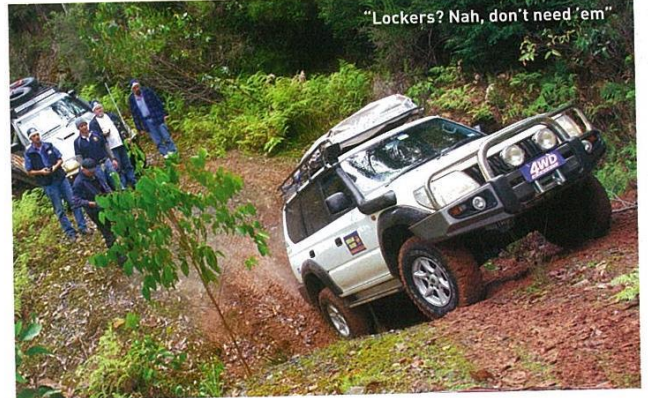
"We want to show the world how good our recovery gear is," Bret said. "You've been going fine so far Glenn. At worst, I guess we'll get to test the winch."

That left Terry Smith, but I could tell from the look on his face – part smile, part determination – that he was coming along even if he had to poke that Patrol through holes in the logs one bit at a time. With a front diff locker, the standard Nissan limited rear, a suspension lift and big fat 35in STTs, the Patrol was far from stock. But it was longer than stock and these tracks had proven pretty tight already. We all looked his way.

"Someone's got to keep an eye on the tyre pressures!" Terry said, and big Rob Van Driel just turned and grinned. I wonder if he would have grinned as much if he knew he was in for a couple of days of swinging off a winch cable?



Deep cutouts cause problems for the Prado, even with the tough suspension



"Lockers? Nah, don't need 'em"







The day kicked off fine as Pete's 100, Milo, the Cooper Patrol, the Prado and the muscle-bound V7 Shorty slowly weaved down to a river crossing at the base of the climb. The lads used this bridge during a reconnaissance trip a few weeks before but they'd driven over it on quad bikes.

One look was enough to convince us it wasn't going to support a truck, even with the planks Brian and Coz had tucked in the bush. It was that rotten it had trouble supporting me! Yeah, yeah, I know. Just remember, it costs a lot of money to look this good! Ask my publican mate Pelican Pete.

The exit track on the other side of the first river was tight, slow and muddy - the good bits that is. As it climbed, the forest closed right in on us. Before long, Brian had the chainsaw out to lop a couple of fallen trees we had no chance of scraping

past. More than once these trees were on the huge side but nothing our Tassie mates couldn't handle.

Along with the chainsaw, they brought along a 'log snig'. This is a local invention that, when used in conjunction with a chain and a winch, could roll trees out of the way.

Pretty soon the track began to get boggier as we climbed steeper. We all adopted different tactics aimed at making the best out of what we had. Pete Holman's mighty 100 Series was built for this sort of stuff and kept ploughing ahead as he used a mixture of mud-racing throttle work and sheer diesel muscle to keep those fat 35in tyres turning. Pete had some big advantages - big wheels, a big lift and big strength in those locker-equipped Nissan/Tojo diffs - and his excellent mud skills meant he was winching less than the rest of us.

With plenty of Prado power to play with, Editor Glenn put his rally driving skills to work and was doing a superb job given that he didn't have lockers and didn't want to scratch the paint. Terry was bringing up the rear and taking it slower to save his truck. However, he was keeping up, because he wasn't getting stuck much either.

In this country, it's all about lift and the size of the tyres, but its sheer driving skill that pays the big dividends. Having to go where we had all gone before, Terry sure got the slippery end of the stick.

Several times, when things were just too tight to winch or strap, I pulled the Maxtrax off Milo's rack and we used them to great effect. Slow, maybe, but if you were on your own they would have been the only way out.

On a rare downhill stretch, Milo got wedged on a stump. It was too slippery and steep to risk pulling her forwards, no way to pull her backwards and jacking on an angle was impossible. Then, I doubled up on the Maxtrax and ramped her over that stump so easily it wasn't funny. Neither was slip-slopping back uphill to recover those muddy Trax! Yet, Brian still reckoned this was the easy bit.

Mud is all about momentum. With the day closing fast under the rainforest canopy, we were out to make much of the few bits that offered some traction. During one of these rare moments, Editor Glenn launched the Prado around a quick corner and snagged a log that the car in front rolled up. It shot straight through the bottom tank of the Prado's radiator and drained it instantly.



I tried a quick fix with some silicone and tape, and Glenno filled her up with a bucket dipped in a puddle down the track. We figured by running without pressure – leaving the radiator cap right off – the Prado might have a chance of driving out.

Meanwhile, Milo was starting to make some horrible crunching noises after sliding into a wheel-deep ditch under power with the front locker in. I heard the crack and about the same time, Coz said 'Sounds like a CV Roothy'. But he hadn't stopped and mostly because stopping wasn't something you did in the few places a bloke could find traction.

Then, the steering died just before the front-right wheel locked up completely. I knew I'd trashed that CV beyond belief, and it had locked up on all the shrapnel floating around that housing.

It was almost dark. We were on one of the few flat parts of the track we'd seen all day up on a ridge surrounded by fat old trees that flew to the sky. The Prado had a chance, but Milo wasn't going anywhere. I broke out the tools and told the other lads to keep on going.

After all, we thought it was only a few kilometres out now and there wasn't any food except that left from lunch. I had a spare CV in the back and all the tools I needed to fix it. They might as well go on while there was still some light to play.

That folks, is about where the Tasmanian 'Wild West' DVD ends. Milo was going nowhere for the night and the other lads were waving goodbye. But that's only half the story, the soft part, if you will, no matter how hard it had been. The bit we couldn't film was about to begin. A mad struggle through the night that saw men, machinery and recovery gear tested way beyond belief.

Brian figured it was about 5km to the end of the climb up that

mountain and knew it would get tougher before settling down. However, he hadn't counted on it raining the week before and the sort of churning, knee-deep mud a string of trucks can make.

At the last minute, Terry Smith announced that he and Rob would be staying too. They figured nobody should be left alone in such a remote place, especially after watching my high-lift jack collapse as the rain forest floor gave way. I got smart around then and used two Maxtrax under the jack – no more slips. Talk about a multi-use product!

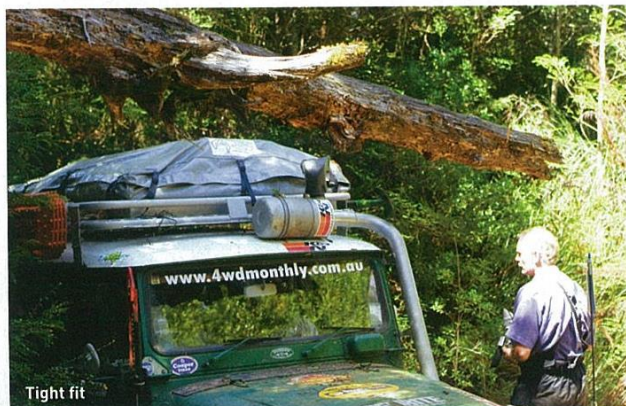
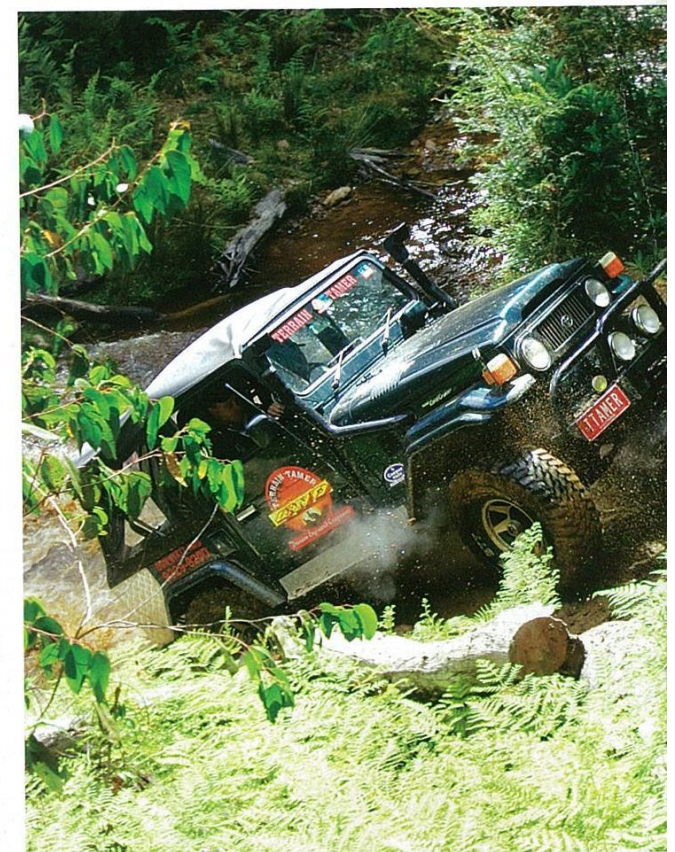
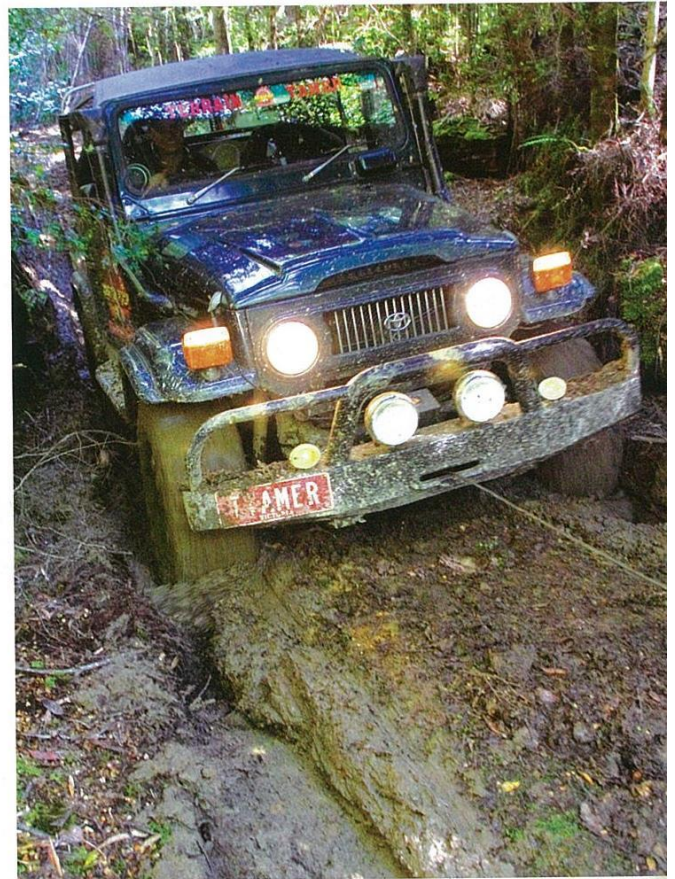
Having that Icom radio in Milo meant we got to hear most of the action well into that night. The boys had gotten just out of sight around the next corner when the winching started again, the repair on the Prado radiator fell out and then hours later we heard Glenn say his battery was flat too.

He'd been driving the Prado in spurts to stop the waterless donk from overheating, but that and the strain of the winch on a motor that couldn't be left idling meant he lost power altogether. Pete Holman had strapped the Prado to the back of the 100 with a short length of chain and was skull-dragging Glenno out.

The bits they had traction for anyway. For the rest it was winching again and again on an endless struggle into the dark night that just went on and on. Terry, Rob and I listened to their struggles until well after midnight when the Icom began to fade about the same time we did.

Early next morning, with Milo back together as a three-wheel-drive because the axle was chewed out too, Terry climbed a slope and got a glimmer of reception on his CDMA phone. Amongst all the messages about work was one lonely voice. It was Desley who had driven back to Waratah the day before.

"Terry, if you and Roothy get this, the boys got phone range about sun

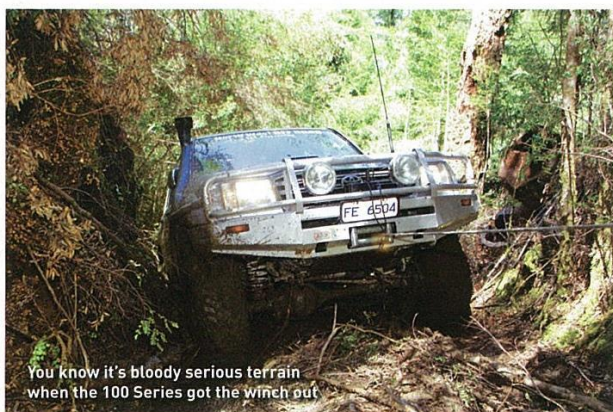


Tight fit





Disaster strikes for the Prado's radiator

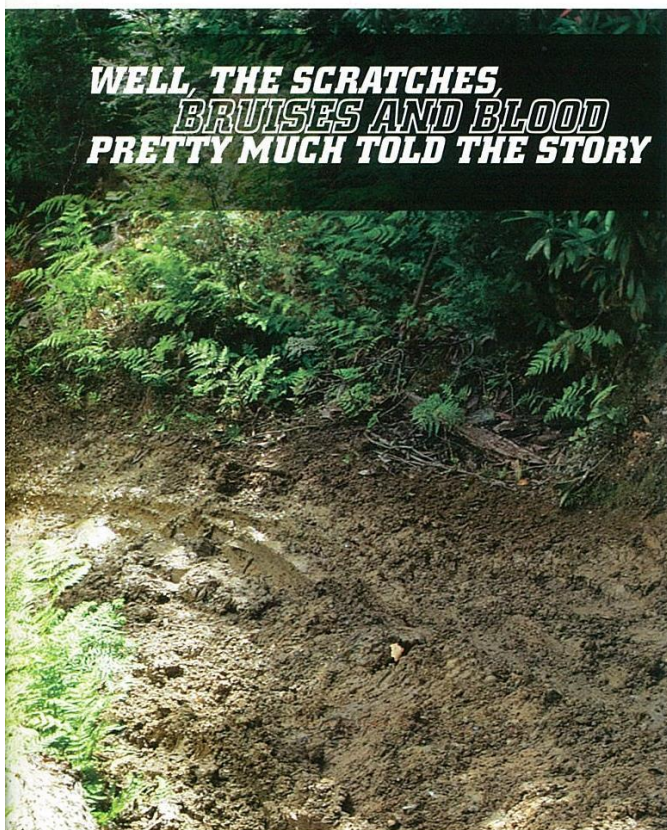


You know it's bloody serious terrain when the 100 Series got the winch out



The big Cooper Patrol squeezes around another corner

**WELL, THE SCRATCHES,  
BRUISES AND BLOOD  
PRETTY MUCH TOLD THE STORY**



up and asked me to pass on a message. They said forget it, go back down the hill, it'll take too long to come through. They've been going hard all night and still are. Brian reckons it'll be after lunch before they make it back to the road. If you get this message, turn back. You will be better taking a chance sliding downhill and crossing that river again. And I've got some nice steaks for lunch when you get back to town, okay?"

So we turned around and slid back down that hill. It took a few winches, half a dozen snatches and a couple of quick digs with the Maxtraxs, but we popped back out at the river about three hours later. Having blown it badly the day before, it was a cinch to cross this time and Terry even managed to blast the big Patrol straight up that slippery clay bank on the other side.

So, with just one more quick snatch, both Milo and the big Nissan were back in the land of the living. Desley had sent Jimbo and Greg back down the track in the tray back to show us the way out.

We got back to Waratah about 10 minutes after the lads lobbed in. It took 26 non-stop hours of winching, skull dragging and running up and

down slippery hills with ropes, cables and straps to cover that last 12km of track. Sometimes, someone might have grabbed a few minutes shut-eye waiting at the wheel for a cable to come back down, but there wasn't any rest that night.

Pete Holman's truck put in a massive effort while dragging the dead Prado in its wake, whether winching or driving. At one stage, the plug on the winch pulled out and it looked like they were going nowhere fast. Then our mighty stills shooter Dean stepped up, putting his street-machine knowledge to the fore, and hot-wired that plug so the climbing could continue.

The seven-cylinder Shorty had the easiest run of the lot. However, Bret and Dale still had winch after winch where they would wander off into the pitch-black bush looking for a tree strong enough to get a strap around. Well, the scratches, bruises and blood pretty much told the story.

Everybody got tested severely that night. Editor Glenn worked his arms off steering the dead Prado through the night in the wake of Pete's 100 and he did it all with no brakes and no lights. He said it was one of the most awesome experiences of his life before collapsing in his swag.



Our video cameraman, the super-fit Peter Watts, had taken turn after turn clawing and climbing those clay hills to take some of the pressure off Brian and the other lads. Peter 'Coz' Cosmetto was tirelessly working away all night and the next morning too. Nobody got to take it easy – on this trip, easy was pulling a CV out at night in the mud.

Those still standing enjoyed a big 'Desley steak' and then one by one, the lads crawled off to sleep through the afternoon. It was a truly heroic effort, a night full of ankle-banging action and knee-deep mud. The food – what little they had – soon ran out, their water ran out, no sleep, no break from the relentless and backbreaking toil that is four-wheel-driving at its worst.

That night, as we gathered one last time in the campground, I felt there had been a change in the air. We were tight, solid and we lived life right on the edge to come back and tell the tale. The challenge of that track, the heartbreak and the work had somehow lifted our spirits higher than those rainforest giants.

Like soldiers returning from battle, we'd fought hard and survived. We were proud of each other and ourselves. We were proud of our gear. I'm sure I saw Bret lovingly stroking one of his much-abused Terrain Tamer straps that afternoon when he thought no one was watching.

Likewise, Terry Smith was pretty excited about the performance of those Cooper tyres. Despite radiator piercing logs, sharp sawn stumps,

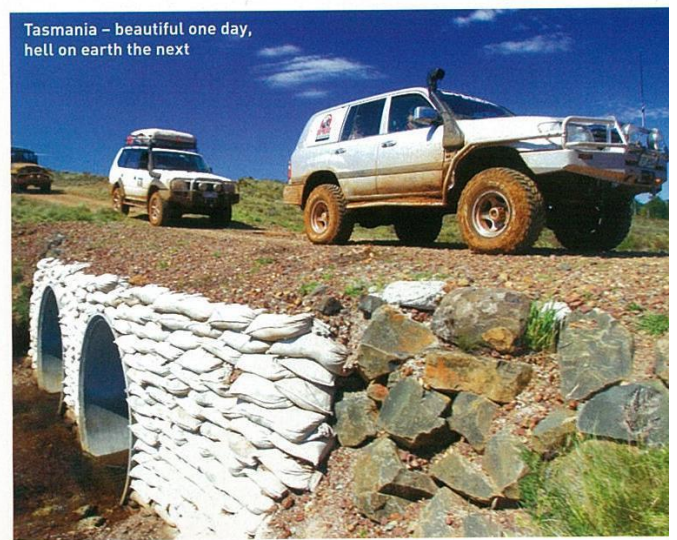
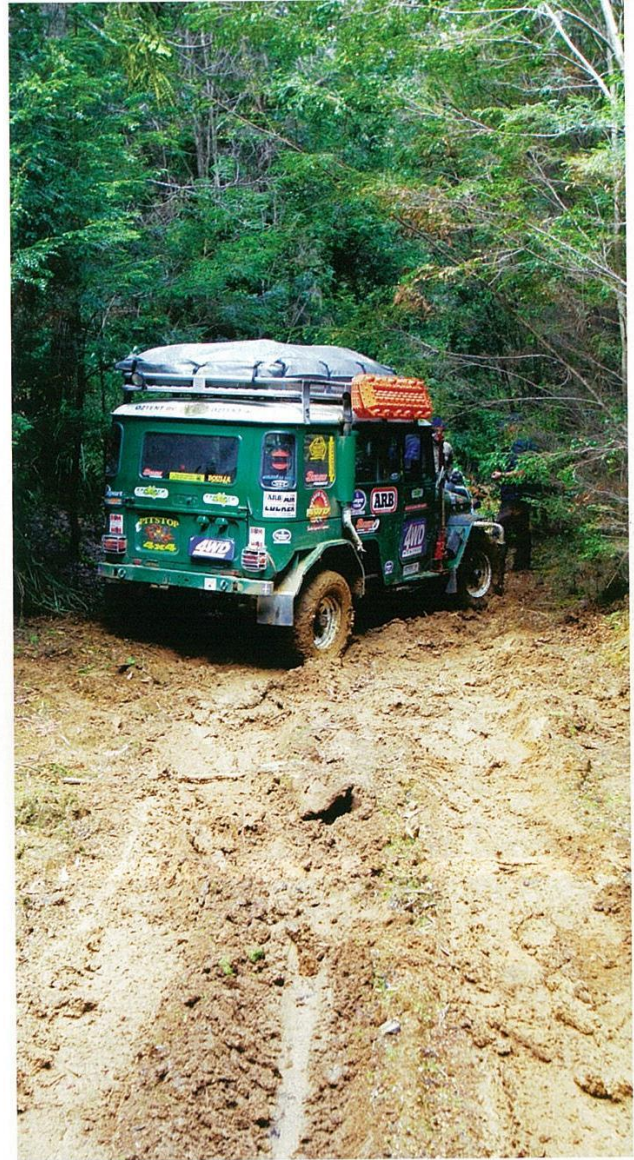
axed poles and an awesome pounding under atrocious conditions – and all done at an average of 16psi – not a single rip, tear or puncture had let any of the vehicles down.

All things considered, Cooper's Armortek sidewall construction had proven itself in the toughest, real-world test ever. I bet there were a few emails winging their way to the US of A the next week to pass that knowledge on.

Now, back in Brisbane, with Milo safely in the shed and a pile of muddy gear to sort out, I'm still feeling proud of my mates and their efforts that night. We've always done things tough here at *4WD Monthly*, we've often blazed trails that others don't touch and pushed products further doing it. Our readers know that and most approach off-roading life the same way – build your truck tougher and you'll go further. When you stop, find a way to keep going and when it breaks, fix it.

I guess it all boils down to the sheer excitement of a big challenge and the thrill of going places nobody else has gone in years, if at all. Australia is all about big adventures, after all. That's what makes it the world's best country to live a full life in.

Boy, didn't we have an adventure this time! Hey Glenn, got any wine-and-cheese type touring yarns on offer? I reckon I need another holiday. What d'ya mean we don't do it like that? I know mate, I know... ■



Tasmania – beautiful one day, hell on earth the next

