

It's a tough job hammering poles into the Outback dirt when it's 50C. But Al Walton loves his job, knowing if he doesn't keep his stretch of the 5400km Dog Fence safe, the farmers to the south will pay a heavy price

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His working day starts well before dawn and he's usually still going at dusk. The routine is monotonous. He completes the same tasks over and over again – often in challenging weather conditions.

He can go days on end without seeing another person, showering or sleeping in a proper bed. It's an 18-hour drive back home to see his family, his only means of communication are by satellite phone and UHF radio, and, if his car breaks down, it's a two or three-day walk to civilisation.

And every day Alan Walton spends on the job, he reckons he's won the lottery.

Walton is one of five contractors employed in South Australia to maintain the Dog Fence – the legendary piece of outback infrastructure which keeps wild dogs out of the pastoral lands of southern SA, southwestern Queensland and NSW.

The fence is more than 5400km of wire, wood and steel, and stretches from Fowlers Bay in the far west of SA to the Bunya Mountain National Park, west of Toowoomba in Queensland.

About 2200km of the fence is in SA, and Walton is charged with looking after a 321km section near Coober Pedy. His run starts west of the town, loops around the north of the opal mining mecca and then heads southeast towards Roxby Downs.

This is his dream job – and has been since he was a kid in Warrnambool, in Victoria. He can't remember exactly why, but reckons he must have seen a documentary about the fence when he was young, and it stuck in his head.

"It really is like I've won the lottery," he says. "I knew even when I was a kid I wanted to do something like this. I could picture myself working away ... It's never worried me being by myself, so I thought something like this might be all right and it's turned out just fantastic."

Walton has agreed to let *SAWeekend* tag along for a couple of days on his fortnightly patrol. He picks us up before dawn in his battle-worn 2003 Toyota Hilux – a work-horse with more than 345,000km on the clock – and we're on the road by 5.30am.

We leave the wild and dusty Outback centre which is Coober Pedy, hit the Stuart Highway and head north for about 40km until the road and the dog fence cross paths.

In the half-hour or so it has taken to arrive at the fence, the sun has risen to reveal a barren but beautiful desert landscape dominated by the famous red soil of the Outback.

We turn right onto a dusty four-wheel drive track, off-limits to the public, and start crawling along the north side of the fence, looking for holes.

Walton's job is to make sure there is nowhere the dogs can get through, and he drops the speed to less than 10km/h as we hug the fence and his keen eye scans the fence from top to bottom.

The fence, a combination of wire, wooden posts and star droppers about 150cm high, is smaller and significantly less grand than its iconic status might indicate. No-one knows for sure, but some of the wooden posts propping it up are probably more than 100 years old.

Recently, pastoralists have fought for, and eventually won, government support to rebuild about 1600km of the SA section.

Tenders for that \$25 million, five-year project opened in November and the work is expected to create 63 full-time jobs and require up to 71,000 timber posts, 127,500 steel droppers and more than 7000km of wire.

It's an upgrade that pastoralists such as Peter and Margie Whittlesea, who run sheep on Mt Eba Station just north of Glendambo, believe is essential.

"If that fence was not there, I simply would not run sheep," Peter Whittlesea

If these dogs get down south, it's gunna be hell for the farmers



says. "And sheep are the most profitable enterprise, in pastoral conditions, by a long way. We run a few cattle as well, but sheep provide 80 per cent of our income."

"The dog fence is like the bread and butter because, if that's not there, we ain't got a sheep flock."

Whittlesea reckons they have lost between 200 to 300 sheep to wild dogs since becoming co-owners of Mt Eba four years ago, but there are horror stories of farmers losing 1800 sheep in less than a year. Pastoralists in the Woomera and Roxby Downs areas have suffered some of the most significant losses.

Whittlesea is a member of the SA Dog Fence Board which has rallied both state and federal governments to stump up the cash to make the fence replacement possible.

Independent analyses commissioned by the State Government and Livestock SA showed the positive impact on the state's coffers from the rebuild could be \$1.8 mil-

lion in the first year, \$8.1 million in the third year and continuing to \$5.3 million in the 20th year.

The drought, which has gripped most of Australia, has put more pressure on the fence, as animals including dogs, kangaroos, emus, camels and wild horses head south in search of water and food.

This migration inevitably leads to damage as they try and burst through the fence – damage which men such as Al Walton must repair.

Walton and his four fellow contractors are charged with patrolling the existing fence, endlessly searching for holes and weak spots caused by animals, flooding and rust.

He is required to cast his eye over every centimetre of fence at least twice a month. To do this, he breaks up each run into two sections – one west of the Stuart Highway, and one east.

SAWeekend is joining him for his eastern run – a 160km stretch which usually takes



Alan Walton at work maintaining his 160km stretch of the famed outback dog fence, near Coober Pedy; inset, the remains of a feral dog

a couple of days, depending on how much damage he needs to repair.

When he's out on a run, Walton loads up his ute with a swag, packs the Esky with enough food to get him through and sleeps under the stars for as many nights it takes to get the job done.

The back of the Hilux is loaded with tools and equipment, including various sizes of star droppers, rolls of wire and shovels to fill in any tunnels the dogs have tried to burrow under the fence. He also packs a bucket of dried, poisoned kangaroo meat to distribute at key points along the fence.

The dog fence is taut at top and bottom and turns at right angles where it meets the ground to form a foot-long apron which is held down by a few metal pegs and thousands of rocks which range in size from tennis ball to football. Animals – dogs, emus, camels or kangaroos – move the rocks off the apron, and replacing them takes up the most of Walton's time.

His eyes are constantly scanning, look-

ing for missing rocks, animals stuck in the fence or holes. It's repetitive, tedious work which goes something like this: Drive a few metres ... stop ... get out of the car ... replace a rock ... return to car ... put car in gear ... drive a few metres ... stop ... get out of car ... replace a rock ... repeat ad infinitum.

Comfort levels aren't helped by the fact the airconditioning in Walton's old Hilux doesn't work when the car is moving so slow and the outside temperature is pushing 40C – but there's no place on Earth he would rather be.

Walton finds it hard to articulate exactly why he loves it so much. "That's a bloody hard question," he muses as we bump along in first gear. "I just enjoy doing it. You've got no-one hanging over your shoulder to tell you what to do. You just dig in and do it, you know?"

As we drive along in the heat, Walton fills most silences with stories. He's a good talker – one of the best. We discover that the eastern run – the one we are on – usual-

ly takes a couple of days to complete. The western run, even though it is about the same distance, takes longer because there is usually more damage.

Much of the western run is in country heavily populated by camels. Even though some of the fence in this area is protected by an electric charge, when a camel tries to burst through it can cause significant damage.

It usually takes Walton about a week to finish both sections, so he has a week spare before loading up the ute and doing it all over again.

Now aged 57, he's been minding the fence for nearly seven years and there's a palpable sense of pride when he talks about the role he plays in the livelihoods of thousands of farmers south of the fence.

"If people don't realise how important it is, well, they should," he says. "Because if all these dogs start coming down south and start breeding, the farmers are going

to be inundated with these bloody dogs. And one dog can do so much damage."

Walton is paid to monitor the fence twice a month but every now and again, for his own peace of mind, he's done an extra run to make sure there is no way the dogs can get through.

"I'd rather do that than lose sheep," he says. "When you care about what you do, of course you worry about it."

He had dozens of previous jobs over the years, ranging from firefighter, to sandblaster, to painter, to dock worker before finally landing his dream job after pestering the dog board for what he guesses would be about 20 years.

He built a life, with wife Therese and daughters Caitlin and Isabella, now 21 and 19, near the small town of Condah, in southwest Victoria, between Hamilton and Portland. For the first year or so of his tenure on the fence, he commuted from Condah, making the 36-hour round trip every two weeks, living out of his swag for days on end while on patrol. >



Mount Eba station sheep farmer Peter Whittlesea, above, says he couldn't keep stock alive without the protection of the dog fence; right, Alan Walton maintains the 160km of dog fence between Stuart Highway and Mount Eba station corner near Coober Pedy



His family moved up to Coober Pedy for a year or so when he bought a dug-out there, but Therese, Caitlin and Isabella returned "down south" to take advantage of better schooling and work opportunities.

So now Walton spends most of his weeks off travelling back home, and the differences in landscape and climate between parched Outback SA and the lush south-west Victoria could hardly be more pronounced.

"When I'm up here in dusty, hot conditions they are walking around in gum boots in the rain down there," he says.

Sometimes Therese, Caitlin or Isabella join him on a run, but his most common travelling mate is his trusty dog Mick – a companion more-than capable of listening to Walton's stories or joining in the occasional sing-a-long.

SAWeekend has taken Mick's seat for this trip and, in searing heat, we listen intently as Walton jumps seamlessly from story to story, which are mostly about his family, which he obviously adores.

There are also yarns about a seemingly endless number of former workplaces, his bush footy career, cutting wood for extra income (at his peak he was able to cut and split six tonnes a day), camping, pigeon racing and dallying in opal hunting, both at Coober Pedy and White Cliffs, in Western NSW.

He tells us about the time, soon after he started on the fence, when he became bogged after heavy rain. His four-wheel drive had a hand winch, but there were no

trees to connect to, and he didn't want to hook up to the fence for fear of damaging a post. So his only way out was to dig a hole, bury his spare tyre, connect the winch to the tyre, drag the car along about 20m, dig the tyre out of the hole and then repeat the process time and time again.

It took him two days, but he got out. It's a story of resourcefulness, which sums up the jack-of-all-trades skill set required to be a successful dog fence patrol man.

When Walton is out on a run, he's totally reliant on his bush knowledge, his wit and his vehicle.

He spends hours before each trip adding grease to anything on his ute which needs greasing, checking and cleaning oil and air filters, and running a fine-tooth comb over the rest of the car to prevent any breakdowns while he's working in one of the harshest and most isolated places on Earth.

He recalls with fondness the time a few years ago when he had to replace a long section of fence which had been washed out by rain.

He recruited his daughter Caitlin to give him a hand, and the pair strung up wire and hammered star droppers into the parched earth for days as the temperature consistently topped 50C.

Then there was the time he had to skim rocks at a snake, which had climbed up under his spare tyre, or the time another snake chased him away from the fence.

We drive as Walton talks, and his stories

are interrupted by constant stopping, mostly to return rocks to the apron, but also to check and replace any bait a dog has taken.

As we travel, the terrain slowly changes. Sometimes a few, small shrubs break up the magnificent red soil of the Outback. The vegetation is thicker and more diverse when we pass through a few shallow creek beds which haven't flooded for years. But mostly the scenery is completely barren, the soil covered with a blanket of black rocks, which stretch for kilometres to the horizon.

It's an impossibly harsh and lifeless landscape which has attracted many Hollywood movie-makers looking to recreate a lunar setting.

Turns out we're on a pretty smooth run, which Walton is happy about. There's not much damage to repair, which means he's been doing his job well. We don't see any animals or their carcasses stuck in the fence, and, apart from some missing bait, no sign of any live dogs. In fact, after nearly seven years on the fence, Walton reckons he's only seen about 50 or so wild dogs, and never a purebred dingo.

"You don't actually see them (dogs) that often," Walton tells us.

"Though there was one time when I had Therese with me and we were camped for the night. We had the fire going and were having a few beers before tea.

"I just glanced across (and saw a wild dog). The bugger was standing just behind a bush, probably about 10-12 feet away from us. I think the only reason I saw him was that I was lifting my can up to have a mouthful and he caught my eye. I just gave Therese my can, walked around, grabbed my rifle and shot him."

The rifle is mainly used to euthanise kangaroos and emus which have become stuck in the fence. Or if he sees a camel or a dog anywhere near the fence.

"Yeah, the camels are the worst," he says. "They're a bugger because they are so big – they just knock down so much of it. I've seen the fence to a stage where they could have walked over the top if it, that's how much damage they've done."

He sometimes cops backlash when people hear he has to shoot animals, but he views the gun as just another tool – just



like his shovel, sledgehammer or fencing pliers.

"People have got to understand that camels are an introduced species – even though they've been here for quite some time – and there's a lot of them about," Walton says.

"Some people ask if you can just scare them off ... but they don't understand that it just doesn't work that way. So that's part of my job and what I need to do.

"I hope common sense prevails and people understand that this is a job which needs to be done because if these dogs all get down to the south, it's gonna be hell for the farmers."

Walton reckons there's no way to predict when he'll be inundated with animals. On some runs, like this one, he barely sees another living thing. But there have been times when he'll see hundreds of kangaroos bouncing along near the fence. Or there'll be scores of emus trotting along in front of him.

After more than 12 hours crawling along the fence, nearly exclusively in first gear, we pull over and set up camp for the night. We've travelled about 100km in the searing heat, and the first beer barely touches the sides.

Walton clears some ground for a fire, cooks up a couple of steaks, leans back on his swag and stares into the type of spectacular, star-filled night sky that only Outback Australia can provide.

This is the moment we understand his difficulty in verbalising why he thinks he has the best job in the world. The serenity of sleeping rough under the Milky Way is something grey nomads, Big Lappers and other Outback lovers travel thousands of kilometres to experience.

Al Walton gets paid to do it every night.