

An anniversary to remember

Part 1

With Daisuke Sugiura's research visit nearly at an end, I wanted to give him a taste of the Australian bush. I persuaded him to take a day off so we could walk for 3 days (timed to coincide with my birthday) and Julius Sagun (visiting from Western Sydney Uni) joined us. During our planning meeting I asked what gear they had or needed and we divided up the catering. The weather forecast 10 days out suggested that the Friday was a better option than the Monday, so leave was locked in. The night before we left, the forecast predicted some rain on Saturday, getting heavier on the Sunday. As it turned out, I should have grabbed a screen shot of that!

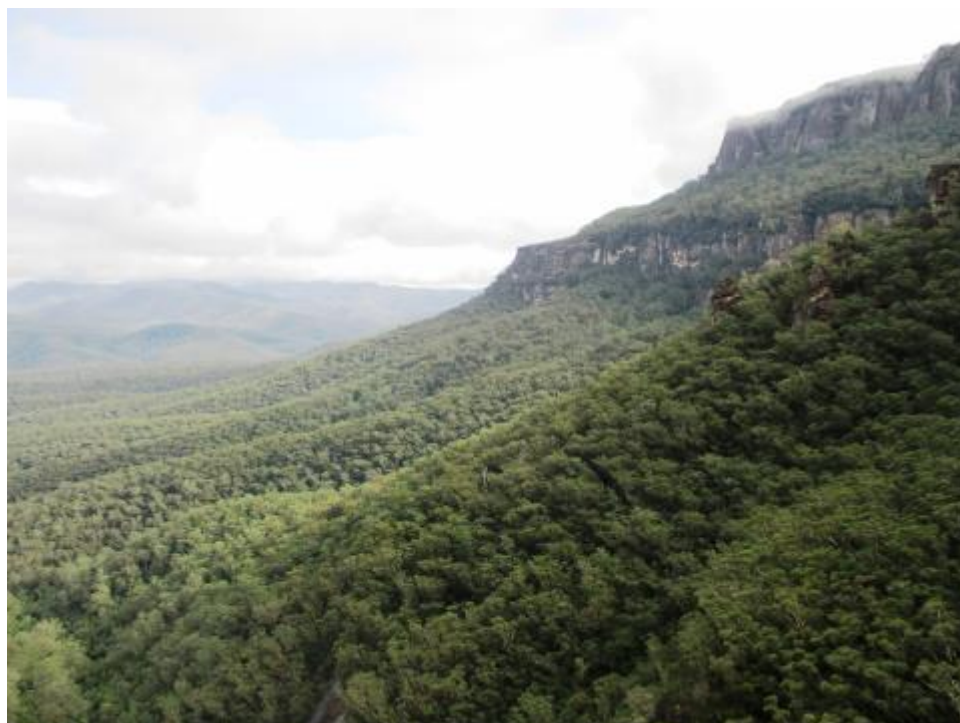
It takes about 3 hours to drive from Canberra to the point where the walk starts at the foot of the Castle in the Budawangs. This is a wonderful National Park that is the southern end of the sandstone formations (East of Braidwood) that form the Blue Mountains. Pigeon House mountain that sits at the south east corner of the Budawangs was named by Captain Cook on his first visit to Australia and would be familiar to most people who have been to Batemans Bay. We set off on the walk around 10, wading across Yabbaro river in water below our knees.



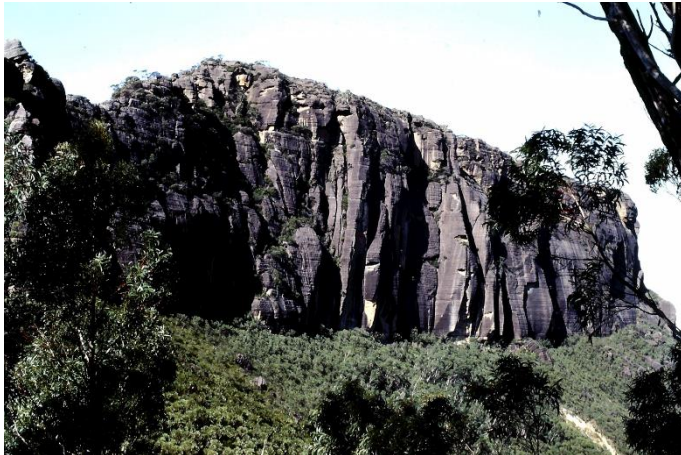
From there it is a one hour climb up a ridge along an old 4WD track to reach the foot of the lower cliff line below the Castle. The track then winds along the base of the cliff around boulders, tree roots and erosion gullies. At this stage, the 350m climb did not suppress smiles on Daisuke and Julius's faces.



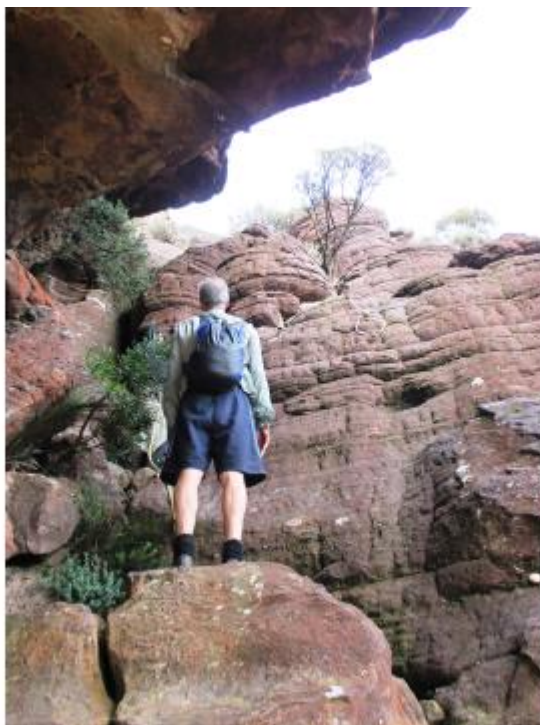
After another hour we emerged on a rock ledge with views to the south where we had started and to Mount Owen in the west which we planned to climb the following day. A great place to stop for lunch, but it was eerily quiet except for a single lyrebird down below.



The track then heads up another 200m to a pass between the Castle and Mount Nibelung. Below is a view of the Castle before reaching the saddle taken on another trip. The cliffs are over 100m high.



We dropped our packs and taking only raincoats and a snack, followed the path along the north side to the point where you can climb the Castle. Daisuke had been here a few weeks earlier with Baxter Massey but had been unable in the time he had to find the route up. It is always more enjoyable to discover the path oneself, so I let Daisuke lead the way. He raced off, but when he missed the correct track, I would call him back. The route up does require some rock scrambling skills and in parts there are dramatic cliff faces, so it is not to everyone's taste. Near the top is a rock face that has some ropes left unofficially to help you up, but it would not be sensible to tackle this in wet weather.



Once reaching the top, there is a large plateau covered in short heath with many pools of water in the rock surface.



At the south eastern end, there is a book to sign with a magnificent view to the east and Pigeon House. I suddenly realised that I first reached that point 40 years ago! I have also brought someone here in the early 1980s most of you may recognise – I don't think he was writing equations.





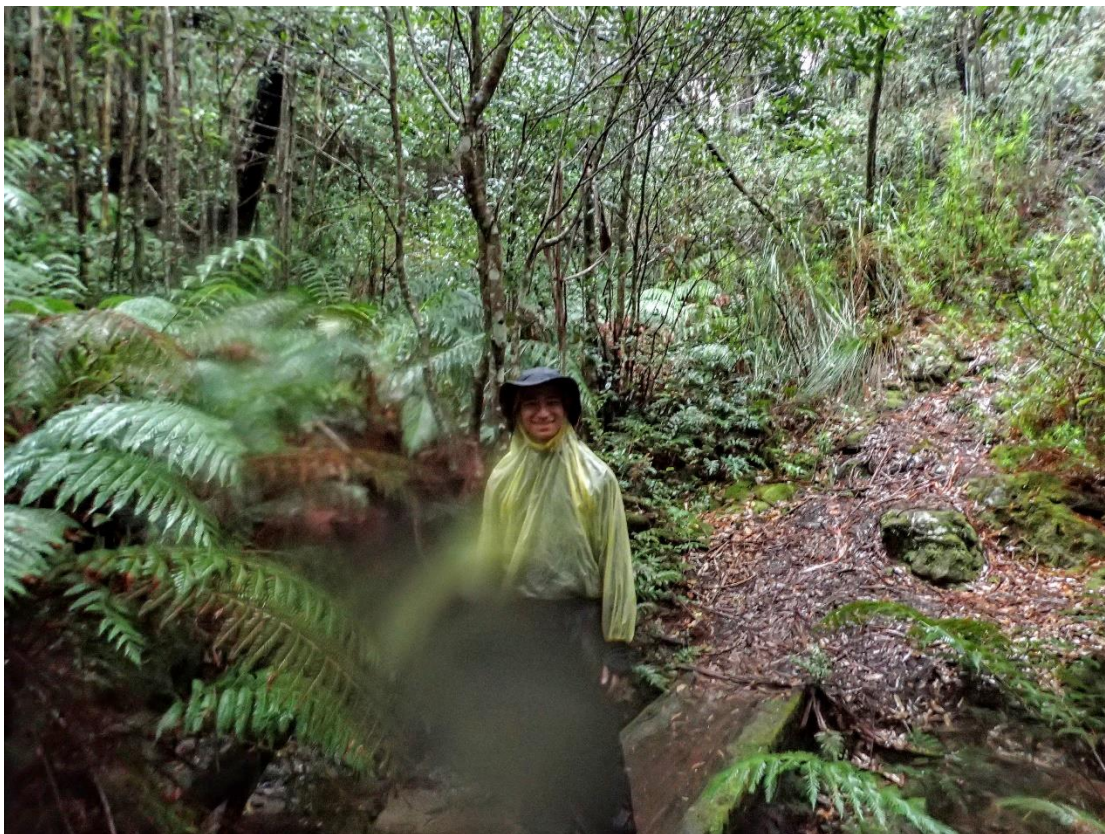
After descending again and returning to the saddle, we collected our packs and found a place to set up the tent. The wood was wet but we got a good fire going to cook with and enjoy.



Some rain fell in the night and Saturday clearly was going to be wet. Unfortunately, the raincoat that Julius had brought was not quite what I was expecting. Rather than abandon the rest of the bushwalk, I lent him a woollen top which would have some warmth even if wet. We set off with a day pack to explore Monolith valley in light rain and low cloud.



Straight ahead through that mist is Mt Cole where we went to explore the rainforest.



Julius showing off the latest in raincoats through a wet camera lens.



In the labyrinth alongside Mt Cole.



Modern signposting to prevent one getting lost. We climbed out past the 7 gods pinnacles but the mist hid the views so we returned to Monolith valley. By now the track had some sections that had filled knee deep with running water. At this stage we were keen to work around these if possible.

In good spirits we then tackled a complicated pass that gives access to Mt Owen. The mist reduced the light and the rain had now started to flow off the rocks creating waterfalls which made finding the track more challenging. Small stone cairns led to the foot of this waterfall but it turned out this was not the track. Instead there was another cairn that hinted at an alternative zig zagging route. What is fun about this pass is that it twists and turns, heading up side gullies and even requires a Jack and the Beanstalk ascent up a tree clinging onto a rock crevice to gain access to the top.



The track was overgrown and in the wet the bushes hung over obscuring the way. Fortunately there are many stone markers to guide you along if you keep alert. We reached the end of Mt Owen in low cloud which obscured the fantastic view that can be seen of the castle (photo from a previous trip). Again we signed the book although the pen refused to work for Daisuke, so he has left an impression instead.



View from Mt Owen looking east to the Castle and Pigeon House on a good day from a previous trip.

We ate our lunch sheltering from the wind and headed back across Mt Owen and through Monolith valley. By now Julius's raincoat was in shreds having been no match against the scrub we had passed through. At one point the track disappeared until we realised that it was now underneath a waist deep pool of water. Once we reached our campsite again Daisuke was keen for us to have another fire as it is not allowed in Japan. Given the rain and wet wood, this was going to be a challenge. We took our food up to the foot of the cliff edge just along from a waterfall that would give you great shower in warmer weather. I resorted to using a firestarter I bought in Canada (a small cube of waxed corrugated cardboard) and we were all very pleased when the fire got going. Whenever there was a gust of wind, curtains of spray flew onto us from the waterfall. Unfortunately Daisuke did not have his camera with him to record this, having left it in the tent.

Another night of rain and by now I was thinking it would be quite a wet descent. It was Sunday morning, my birthday. We packed up our gear and headed off as there was not much point exploring more. A leech waved us goodbye.



On reaching the point where had stopped for lunch on Friday, the creek which for the first time in my experience had been dry on the way in, was now a raging waterfall.



Still smiling we negotiated a very wet path. I was glad I had a trekking pole as it allowed me to find rocks to step on beneath the torrents of water flowing down the path. It was amazing to see so much water cascading off the cliffs.



Daisuke told me that his PhD supervisor had taken him waterfall climbing in the summertime, so I thought he would be comfortable with what we were experiencing. He was keen to get back to Canberra as he had arranged to meet his landlord and then had a flight booked to Cairns for a trip to the reef. He thought we would be back to the car in an hour.

Part 2

We reached Yadboro river at 11am. Perhaps not surprisingly given the rain, the water level had risen substantially compared to when we started. While I boiled a billy for tea, the water rose another 10cm and I suggested we pitch the tent and wait. This was the first time I have been unable to cross back in the 40 years I have been coming here, although on one previous trip we did need to set up a safety rope to make the crossing. By the river there is no mobile phone reception, so we could not let anyone know our situation. Daisuke and Julius wanted to get home and persuaded me to try walking upstream to cross a few tributaries and see if we could find a safe place to cross. As it was raining, I didn't get the map out to consider the best route. Instead we headed off along what turned out to be a steep slope with thick bush and lawyer vine that was hard work to walk through. It took two hours to cover 800m! At this point there was flat land alongside Yadboro river which made our progress faster until we came to the flooded Oaky creek. In one sense, the flood was welcome because that meant less water in Yadboro river. What I failed to appreciate was how much the water levels had risen while we slogged around the slope. Amazingly, there was a tree bent over the fastest flowing part of the creek. It seemed as if all we needed to do was wade out to it and then use the tree to pass over the difficult part. Julius volunteered to go across first with a rope to set up a safety line. He had been a boy scout in the Philippines, so I asked if he knew how to tie knots before sending him off with the rope. His answer was no! So first we had a quick knot tying lesson. He waded waist deep out to the tree, climbed on and walked along the trunk nearly reaching the other side before having to re-enter the water. After tying the rope he decided to swim back fully clothed which turned out not to be such a great idea as the flow of water pulled him under as he held onto the rope. I had packed away my glasses in preparation for the crossing so did not have a clear view. He managed to regain our side and Daisuke set off with his pack. I was impressed that he too could walk across the tree standing up, but on re-entering the creek he got tangled in the branches before he made it across. I decided to straddle the tree trunk and work my way slowly. I was surprised my waterproof trousers did not tear on the rough trunk. Finally Julius crossed a third time bringing his pack and the rope.



The first part of Oaky creek, waist deep but not really flowing.



Looking back at the second part of Oaky creek with the helpful tree we could climb along to get over the fastest part of the flow.

We pressed on and soon came upon another stretch of water which was flowing slowly which meant we could wade through it safely by holding onto flooded shrubs.



That led to a strip of dry land that had an overgrown track. I was puzzled by this because on my map the only track marked was oriented 90 degrees to this one. It turned out that the new version of the map that I had sent with my daughter (who was also walking that weekend nearby) did have this second track on it, but I was not aware of that at the time. We crossed the track and came to another stream, part of the Yadboro river that had become braided in flood. Again we waded in holding onto shrubs, but this time the flow had more force and we had to be cautious. A mere couple of metres we needed to cross, but the flow would sweep us off our feet without something to hold onto. We had been in the water for some time and we were getting cold. Once again I thought we should set up the tent, but Daisuke thought we could pick up a dead branch to help us across.

I found a eucalypt branch about 4m long and lashed a piece of wood to the end to form a reverse V. I planned to use the stick to place the rope around a tree branch and the V to grab the rope to make it secure. Nice idea but the reality was the stick was so long that holding onto a tree for balance with one hand meant I could not hold the stick up with the other. It did snag the tree but I lost my grip on the stick. Fortunately it had really snagged and the rope was stuck onto it. I packed away my glasses and stepped into the flow with my pack waistband unbuckled. Because the rope was held on the far side of the flow, the force of water pushed me across as I held onto the rope. I was able to haul myself to the tree and tie the rope properly before the others came across.

We were pretty pleased to reach dry land again as we thought we had made it across. High fives were in order. However, our hopes were soon dashed as we climbed up the slope because we were

confronted by a loud roar and a massive stretch of fast flowing water. Well that settled it. We couldn't go forward and we couldn't get back. We were marooned on a little island about 30m across and 100m long. Luckily there was a flat piece of open ground at the foot of a large dead gumtree where we could put up the tent. It was about 4.30 and getting dark. The water had taken its toll on Julius's electronic gear. His phone and camera had expired.

As we got into the tent and got out of our wet gear, we discovered we all had some additional travellers. The wet weather meant that leeches had become active. We plucked them off from around our waists, faces, feet and hands throwing them out the doors of the tent where they gathered on top of our gear waving at us. The trouble with leeches is that they inject an anti-coagulant, so after you pull them off you bleed for quite a while. Later on the bites get itchy and can remain so for several weeks it seems. Through the day we had eaten a few oat bar snacks and that together with some bread and Nutella was our dinner. I was pleased to find we all still had dry sleeping bags to get into, warm and comfortable while the water raged nearby.

That night was disturbed. The roar of the water was loud and changing. I had not had enough to drink during the day and with the flood, the creek water was not appealing as it was very muddy. I thought about collecting rainwater off the tent, but that would have meant leaving a nice warm sleeping bag, so I tried to ignore my thirst. Then I started to wonder what would I do if the water level rose? I knew there was a large dead gum tree just beside our tent. I decided it would be best to throw the rope around that and tie the three of us standing upright at its base. I am not sure what the others were planning. Since it was getting dark when we had hurriedly put up the tent, we had not really had a chance to look around and assess our options.

Monday morning. The rain had stopped.

I got out of the tent to collect some water and saw that the river level had started to recede. We ate some more bread and Nutella. Daisuke and Julius asked if a search party would come looking for us. I said no because I thought police usually waited 24 hours before reacting and secondly they would not know to look for us upstream off the track. We lay dozing in our sleeping bags, warm and dry watching the leeches arching up and over the roof of the tent. Some time after 11 we heard a sound like a helicopter. I leapt up and grabbed my red raincoat to attract attention. It was a helicopter flying very low over the trees. It came past and I could see a head in the cabin above the winch. I waved my coat and the helicopter paused, then circled around assessing options. It was clear that there was nowhere to land and it returned to hover directly overhead. Wow, that creates a blast and noise. I assumed someone was going to come down in the winch and went to the tent to pack up my sleeping bag. When I stuck my head back out, an SES man was on the ground and we tried to talk above the roar of the helicopter. He could not hear me because of his helmet, but we established that we were ok, just stuck unable to go forward or back. He said the weather was clearing and things should improve. He asked if we had food, which we did, and then said he could take one person out. I returned to the tent to ask if Daisuke wanted to take up the offer as this would mean he could get to sunny Queensland and the reef on the trip he had booked. He seemed pleased and after throwing his stuff into his pack, got fitted out with a harness and had his pack attached to a sling. The two were then winched up to the helicopter and away they went.



I looked at the river and while it had started to go down, it had a long way to go before we could contemplate crossing. Julius was hoping the helicopter would come back for us, but there were many other more pressing emergencies for them to attend to. We returned to waiting in the tent and by mid afternoon I was feeling like something to eat. I asked Julius what snacks we still had. It turned out that Daisuke had thrown the bag of snacks into his pack and taken it with him in the helicopter! That left a small amount of muesli, a piece of malt loaf and a few slices of bread and still some Nutella in the bottomless jar. By late afternoon it was clear we were going to have to wait until the next day for the water level to drop further. It was apparent that at its peak, the water level had reached about 75 cm below the level of the ground under our tent – closer than I thought. And so we spent Tuesday night again on our island.

Another night listening to the roar of the water and by now the ground was not feeling as flat as it had the first night even though we had more space with just the two of us in the tent.

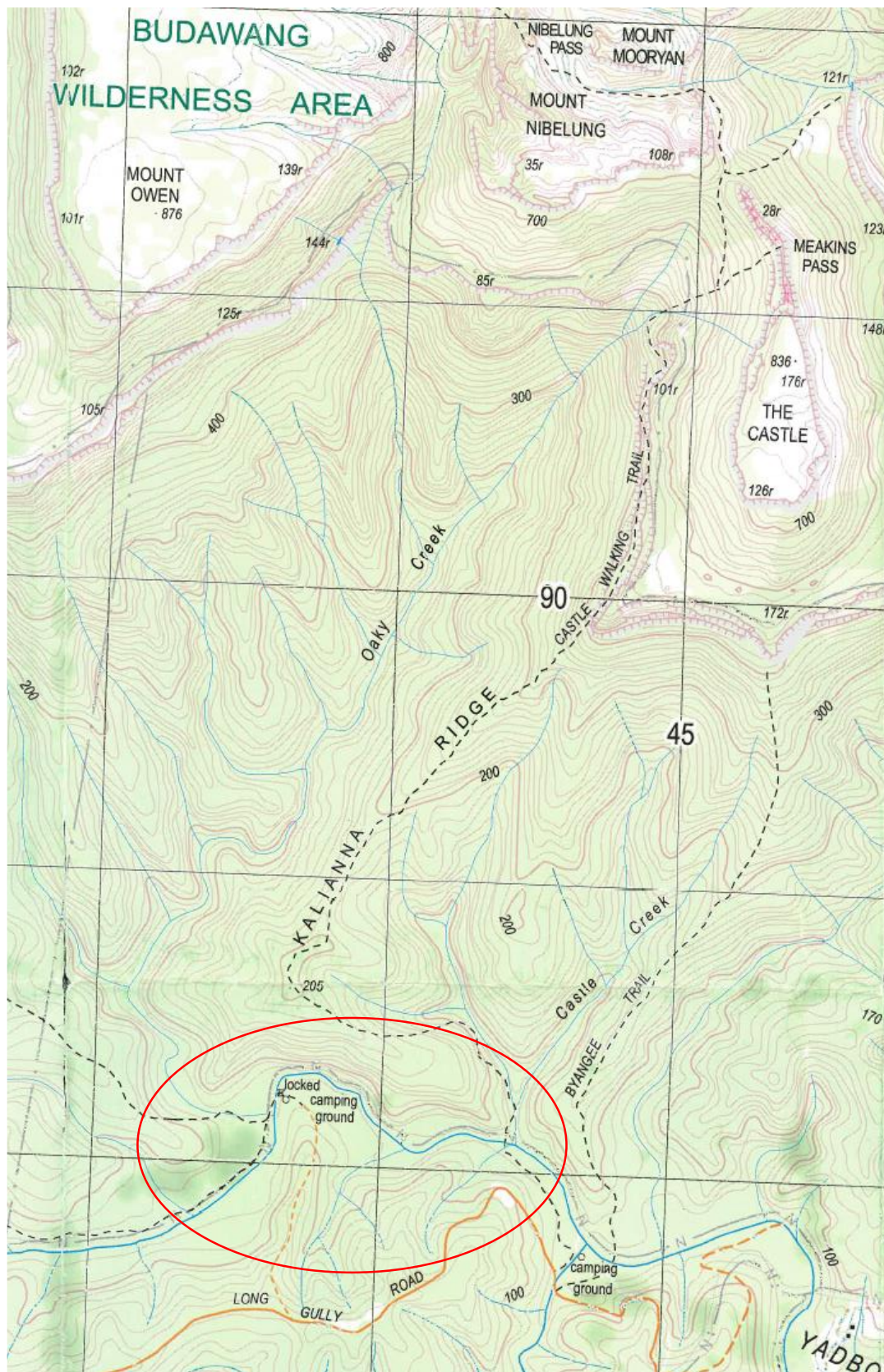
Wednesday morning was fine with glimpses of blue sky. The water had dropped further (now by about 2.75m from its peak) and we could explore our island which was expanding. Our best option for crossing seemed directly from our tent, but 15m across fast flowing flood water is a challenge. We waited until mid morning, the water had receded by another 10cm and then we prepared to swim across. My pack was tied to the rope sitting on a shrub over the water. I would swim across with the rope and then could fasten it and help Julius across. I stood nearly waist deep in the water holding onto a tree trunk watching the water race past. I followed the flow to see how far downstream I would be taken in 6 strokes. I have not tried to swim holding a rope in fast flowing water before and was unsure how it would affect my swimming. I decided it was too risky and we were better to remain patient.

We waited some more and then Julius suggested we try using the forked tree across the river. If we could throw the rope with a stick attached and lodge it between the trunks, that would give us a safe belay point on the other side. I decided that was a clever idea and after we found the perfect stick to tie onto the rope we began to throw the rope across. This turned out to be tricky. You cannot just throw the stick as the rope pulls it up short. Eventually the two of us coordinated, one throwing the stick and the other the coiled rope. Each attempt fell about one and a half meters to the left of the fork. Repeatedly. No matter who threw or whether we tried to aim deliberately upstream. We threw for about an hour it seems. Sometimes just throwing a stick, which of course sailed straight through the fork much to our frustration. Then Julius moved a few meters upstream to a shrub sticking out of the water to try throwing from its base.

Bingo. First throw and it passed through the fork and the stick jammed firmly in the base. We could then tie the rope tightly to our side. I tied my pack to the other end of the rope so I could drag it along behind me as this would leave me light and better able to hang onto the rope. With full wet gear on, I headed out and was surprised how well it was working. The rushing water lifted my legs up and it was like being towed behind a boat. Unfortunately the other half of the rope was not long enough to allow me to pull my pack past the centre of the river and I had to leave it mid stream. I reached the far side and hauled myself to the base of the tree. After I tied the rope securely to the tree beside me, Julius entered the river and was swept across in a large arc by the combination of the current and rope and clambered up alongside me. A short scramble around the huge piles of driftwood debris left by the flood and we finally reached the other side of the river.

We then climbed the ridge and reached a road that we followed back to our car. After changing into dry clothes, we headed back out along the Great Western Distributor, crossing two low bridges that were once again above the water level. However, when we reached Currowan creek, that ford had over 0.5m water flowing over it and the Tarago could not cross. Another billy clearly needed to be boiled to allow for thought. I dug out a forestry map and realised that there was another road option which may have had a bridge. We doubled back and had got half way to Lyons road when we had to stop to clear away a fallen tree from across the road. A car pulled up behind us and we got talking. I wanted to borrow a phone to call my son because my phone that I had left in the car had gone flat. No answer. The man told us that there was indeed a bridge on Lyons road that crossed Currowan creek but that it had just been wrecked by the flood!

We returned to the ford and contemplated another night waiting. Hours went by and around 4.30 a local came past and kindly offered to put us up for the night. We drove back to her place and as I stepped out of the car I was confronted by a very large dead black boar lying alongside it. The movie Deliverance immediately came to mind, but the prospect of comfort won out. We were treated to cake, tea, then jaffles with baked beans and cheese cooked on the open fire while Boar hunting #5 played on the DVD player watched by one son. A huge meal followed. That was a real surprise because when we arrived, Melissa had apologised for not having much in the house to offer. That evening I learnt a lot about feral pig hunting and enjoyed finding out about the family and 3 children. The rain event had caused the biggest flood in 26 years, with possibly 200mm of rain falling. The weather warnings had been issued after we had set off, so we were not really aware of how much rain had fallen until confronted by Yadboro river in flood. Julius and I were offered the honeymoon suite, but Julius declined to share the double bed with me choosing to sleep on the sofa in the adjoining room. It turns out that this was to give him those few crucial seconds to escape in the event they came to slit our throats at night!



Wednesday morning dawned and after a cup of tea, we returned to the ford. As it was still close to the 0.4m mark I wanted to wade across first before driving the car through. I was taking my shoes off when a local crossed in the other direction in a 4WD and assured me it would be OK in the Tarago. And so it was. We regained the highway and finally reached Canberra shortly after 9am.

PS – the helicopter leg.

It had not occurred to me to ask where the helicopter might take Daisuke. His phone and wallet were locked in my car.

Well, after 30 minutes flying, they arrived at the navy base in Nowra and he was taken to the police station. He looked up the Japanese consulate and called them but apparently his case was not of great concern to them. Having missed the bus headed for Canberra that day he then tried to persuade a taxi driver to take him. The first two turned him down – mind you he probably looked a little dishevelled and damp and had no ID or money. The third driver was prepared to take a gamble with Daisuke's digital camera and fancy watch as surety. He arrived safely back in Canberra on Monday evening and did get to Queensland, but you will have to ask him how much the fare was.

Unfortunately my son had to deal with calling in the emergency services instead of studying for his university exams. As Julius is from Western Sydney, at first people thought it was my PhD student Julian and then Julius from the RSB workshop who was with me. However, I was very impressed by the police and emergency services and grateful that Daisuke did not miss his Queensland visit.

A few days later my wife returned from Fiji and asked what would I do differently next time. Well, it was an exhilarating experience, but I should have been carrying an emergency beacon.