

Animals in traffic emergencies

Peter Carrie

The subject I wish to speak to you about today relates to a cattle truck rollover which occurred on Leach Highway in November 1997. Resources involved in this incident included City of Melville staff, police, State Emergency Service (SES), Murdoch Veterinary Hospital staff, RSPCA and the cartage company.

At approximately 06:00 on Monday 10 November 1997 a cattle truck was involved in a collision with a 4WD vehicle at the traffic lights on the corner of Leach Highway and Murdoch Drive, Murdoch. As a result the truck overturned blocking all three lanes west bound on Leach Highway. Forty five cattle were on the truck of which three were killed in the accident. The truck driver was uninjured and the driver of the 4WD was taken to hospital with minor injuries.

City of Melville Waste Services staff were first on the scene around 6.00am and immediately started to direct traffic around the incident and also helped to stop diesel leaking from the truck. At this point five lanes of Leach Highway were blocked either by the truck or cattle. As luck would have it the accident occurred adjacent to Piney Lakes Reserve (which is a large area of public open space in Murdoch) on which some of the cattle immediately proceeded to graze. A group of council workers proceeded to form a semi-circle around the group of cows which had escaped from the accident and were standing together against the fence to Piney Lakes Reserve. Calls were made to the council depot to bring fencing and star pickets to form a compound on the reserve to contain the cattle. By this time the police had arrived and had taken charge of the situation. Council rangers and engineering staff also arrived on the scene to assist, together with members of the local SES unit. Mobile phones and two way radios were extensively used to coordinate and organise the situation.

Over the next hour, in conjunction with the council, fencing was erected around the cows standing observing the street corner commotion! Veterinarians from Murdoch University arrived with hay to help calm down the cattle and at this stage it was decided it would be best to leave them until about 13:00 hours when an attempt would be made to herd them to the university paddocks. The main problem facing authorities was that eight cows had escaped from the reserve and were starting to turn up in residential areas. Teams of SES workers, in conjunction with council staff, were dispatched to locate the cows and if possible bring them back to the pen on the corner of the Piney Lakes Reserve.

Piney Lakes Reserve is 68 hectares of undeveloped bushland covered in the main with low sand plain scrub and wild grasses. The soil is soft black sand. It has a lake in the middle surrounded by trees and marshland.

The drying wild oats were about two metres high but the cows that we were looking for were only about one and a half metres tall so there was only one thing to do - drive through the scrub with a lookout on the roof rack of a 4WD. A mob of seven cows were located on the north western corner of the reserve contentedly resting in the scrub. It was decided that the best method to herd them back was to use the SES search techniques and form an advancing line ahead.

Progress was made at a slow speed and all was going well until about half way back when the group encountered bush thicket. The cows disappeared straight through the scrub and it was decided to pick them up on the other side. When the party got to the other side only four cows had emerged - *smart cows!!* Three had used the thicket to double back and get behind the line and vehicles had to be used, together with members on foot, to herd them back to join the rest of the mob. As luck would have it, and to the great satisfaction of the crew, the cows emerged exactly where the opening in the pen had been prepared. With these cows penned it had come time to do head count to determine how many more needed to be found. The driver of the truck advised that 45 were on the truck less three killed in the accident and after some difficulty it was agreed that 34 were in the pen which left eight unaccounted for.

The police knew about one which had been sighted in Booragoon Lake, but the others were thought to be still in Piney Lakes Reserve. Then came a call that one was some two kilometres away running around Congdon Way, Booragoon. It was all hands to the vehicles and, with a procession of council, SES, police and cattlemen, a convoy converged on the area. The cow had been cornered in the front courtyard of the units at 46 by the council rangers.

The problem was *what do we do now?*

Then came the vet from Murdoch University with a tranquilliser gun in hand and the representative from the pet food company with a gun capable of a 'permanent fix'. The cow, upon seeing these persons, started to destroy the prize rose garden that it was standing in and after a short discussion by the experts it was decided that the 'permanent fix' was the only safe solution in the circumstances.

The fatal shot presented yet another problem. How were the crew going to get a 300 kilo carcass out of a rose garden around the corner of the house and into the truck out the front? The solution was supplied by the SES who provided a handy rope and the manpower. The carcass was dragged to the recovery truck appropriately fitted with a winch. Only seven to find now!!

The police air wing had joined in the search and were spotting from above. Following the circles of the plane, another five were spotted from the vehicle heading towards the houses of Winthrop. They had to be headed off before they reached the road and a crew managed to arrive just ahead of the cows, dismount from vehicles and charge down the road to place themselves between the houses and the charging cows. With a shout, the waving of arms and orange overalls they managed to turn them all around. *Rawhide eat your heart out!*

It was then a case of herding them up and moving them out and back into the pen. Everything was going well. The cattlemen were waiting at the pen. Upon seeing the cattle they sprang into action with their trailbikes, but this only scared the cows more and they ran off in all directions. A subsequent foot search turned up two in the swamp around the lake. They were walked calmly out of the tea trees to the clear ground but as soon as they were out they turned and ran back into the swamp. They knew where they were safe!

The police mounted group had arrived by now so it was time for us to give up and try to get them out. Unfortunately they were not any more successful as one of the cows was still at large until recently, with efforts to locate and apprehend the beast proving unsuccessful due to the thick scrub that provides a refuge.

The police reported that one cow was trapped in a swimming pool in Winthrop. It had been pursued by council workers and run through a super six fence and landed in the neighbouring swimming pool. It was left in the pool whilst it was decided on the best way to deal with the situation. Unfortunately the cow was not impressed with its swim and made several attempts to escape from the pool showering all those present in the process. Authorities decided that to shoot the cow probably would not do the pool water much good so it was roped and dragged from the pool. Unfortunately it was subsequently put down outside the house as it could not be controlled.

Meanwhile back at the ranch one of the mob, frightened by the bikes, ran onto Leach Highway only to be pursued by a police officer on his trusting motorcycle complete with flashing lights and siren. The cow, not wishing to be stopped, took him on and crossed all four lanes of the highway, ignored the red lights on Riseley Street and was last seen heading away from the bike down Riseley Street. The police later celebrated its capture in Applecross.

The cow that had wandered into Booragoon Lake had decided to take a swim and was spotted just on the other side of Leach Highway. The pet meat representative couldn't believe his luck when he saw it just 15 metres from shore and a single shot from his gun prevented any further suffering. The next dilemma was how to get the carcass. Easy (I say) - by boat. But who had a boat?

A small aluminium pump was seconded from the council depot and crewed by volunteers from the SES. One member who was on shore leave from a gas ship was automatically nominated skipper. The shipmates set sail from the bank and fought their way through the trees to where the carcass lay. They attached the winch around its neck and let the crew on shore do the rest.

A busy mornings work complete, it was decided that at 13:00 the cows in the pen near the accident scene would be herded to Murdoch University some three kilometres away. The great cattle drive down Murdoch Drive started with the police mounted group driving their 36 surviving cows ahead of a large convoy of flashing lights. It must have been the most excitement Murdoch had seen for years. All the residents lined the streets the length of the drive. A procession of official vehicles were doing an excellent job of holding the traffic back behind the herd, but half way along it was realised that nothing had been put in place to stop traffic entering from the side roads in front of the herd. Using their local knowledge, workers used the back streets to race past the front of the herd and block the side streets while the great cattle drive went past.

Herding the cattle up to the university yards was undertaken so that they could be transported back out to pasture. Due to the trauma of the event they were no longer suitable for slaughter. The RSPCA attended in this instance and have special constable emergency powers. An emergency officer is available on 0418 678 096 to attend such incidents. They recommend Southdale Knackeries as experts in the use of high powered rifles in such incidents. They can be contacted on 0417 922 352 and have a truck with a winch available for removing carcasses.

In conclusion there are a number of points that come out of this incident that should be highlighted and they are:

- use the right authorities;
- contain animals through the provision of fencing;
- communication is vitally important - particularly two way contact;
- animals should be despatched after containment;
- use of a tranquilliser gun is an option however, it must be realised that the tranquilliser takes some time to take effect and that in most cases where a cow is out of control a bullet is the best option where an expert shooter is present;
- consider enactment of the council's Emergency Management Plan;
- utilise your SES unit who are well suited and trained to assist in such emergencies;
- information released to the press should be accurate and timely, and through one source, to ensure consistency;
- have emergency equipment prepared and ready;
- ensure fresh water supplies are available to staff.

Footnote: The fugitive cow referred to earlier in this paper was finally captured recently after nine months on the run. The beast was roped by horse riders after being flushed out of dense bushland in Piney Lakes by a team of trackers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Peter is currently the Ranger Services Co-ordinator for the City of Melville. He has held this position for the last four and a half years. Prior to this he worked as the Senior Administration Officer, Shire of Ashburton in Tom Price and has worked for the cities of Belmont and Fremantle as an administration officer. Peter has a Diploma in Local Government (Clerk) and was Secretary/Treasurer of the Pilbarra Regional Tourism Association for a two year term. He is a Member of the State Institute of Municipal Management and was a representative to the Active Learning Management Challenge in Canberra 1997.