

Town & Country

Queensland

One man with one aim

By ROSE GLASSER

RISING early on a fine day in September 2008, Northern Territory bushie and father Rob Cook envisioned hard day's work and a routine muster on his station. Little did he realise the only hard work he would do on this day, would be fighting for his life.

Suplejack Downs Station, 640km north of Alice Springs, is situated in the heart of the Northern Tanami and the middle of nowhere.

It is Australia's most isolated cattle station, carrying about 8000 head of Brahman and Shorthorn cross cattle.

Four generations of Rob's family have grown up on the Territory property and it instilled in him a love of the wide open spaces.

In 2005, Rob settled at Suplejack Downs homestead with his new wife, Sarah, to start what they thought would be an active and fulfilling life together.

Rob and Sarah had two children, Braxton, now 5, and Lawson, now 3, and life was good.

Rob became a keen rodeo rider and the family took to the road for his competitions, often hundreds of kilometres away.

But fate dealt the young family a harsh blow.

Braxton was two and Lawson only six months old when the family's lives were turned upside down.

On September 30, the cattle muster began like any other on the vast property.

About mid-morning, Rob went up with one of his pilots to point out some cut points for the muster.

Flying home about 10.20am, the engine failed and the helicopter liter-

ally fell out of the sky from about 60 metres (200 feet).

The pilot tried to guide the machine into a small clearing but the tail rotor struck a tree on the descent and the helicopter was slammed upside down on the passenger side.

Rob's head was forced hard against the roof, dislocating his C4 vertebrae and leaving him with no feeling from his head down.

Rob and his pilot were trapped in one of Australia's harshest environments but he remained conscious the whole time.

"We knew there would be no help for hours... I did a lot of soul searching waiting for help to come."

It wasn't long before the second pilot of the muster found them and the enormous rescue mission began.

It was only at sundown, more than eight hours later, that a rescue helicopter could reach them and Rob was airlifted back to the homestead, where the RFDS was waiting.

Rob was immediately taken to the Adelaide Royal Hospital after a stopover at Alice Springs.

"I was diagnosed a C4 tetraplegic and spent nine weeks in the Intensive Care Unit at the Royal Adelaide Hospital on life support. After 11 weeks I managed to wean myself off the ventilator. Just short of three months after the accident I was transferred to the spinal unit where I experienced my first shower, even if it was on a bed!"

Seven long months later, he was finally well enough to head back to the Territory.

To have his future suddenly stripped away was heartbreaking for Rob and his family.



Rob, Sarah, Braxton, 5, and Lawson Cook, 3, have faced a major life hurdle together but have remained an extremely close-knit family throughout it all.

But this bloke's unique spirit has picked him up from the dark days and brought him back to a life where he wants to be.

"This whole thing has been a massive learning curve for me. The support I was shown from family and friends was nothing short of a miracle and I've tried to keep an open mind through it all. Not forgetting to mention my parents and my beautiful wife Sarah and sons Braxton and Lawson, who endured every aching hour with me. I'm a very lucky boy with the family that I've got."

One of Rob's greatest achievements since the accident has been his award of the Nuffield Scholarship.

"With my injuries, I needed to find a new job and the scholarship seemed like a good way to go because it looks at research into innovative technology in the beef industry," Rob said.

The Nuffield Australia Farming Scholarship is part of a global network of farmers and promotes excellence in all aspects of Australian agriculture.

Rob became Nuffield Australia's 255th scholar and began his global travels in March this year.

Rob is the first scholar to take on the global journey from the seat of a powered wheelchair and has travelled to New Zealand, Brazil, Mexico, US,

Join Rob's quest

THE invitation is open to anyone who would like to join Rob on his **One Man One Wheelchair One Aim** quest, starting on May 23 at the Suplejack Downs homestead. Come and meet Rob on his wheelchair walk when he hosts the **Tanami Desert Challenge Halfway Dinner Beef and Beer night on Saturday, June 4. This will be held at the Tanami Track, 328km north west of Alice Springs (follow the signs). Dress code is Territory rig and \$90 per person includes a three-course meal, beer, wine, entertainment. Kids under 12 free. Entertainment includes Scotty Dann and Satin&Spurs.**
 ❖ For more information or to book, phone Tiani on 0429 826 054. Visit his website www.robcook.com.au or blog www.robcooknt.blogspot.com to keep up-to-date or to sponsor his journey.

Canada and Scotland documenting his journey.

He now has 10 weeks of individual travel to complete before his scholarship report is due in September.

Rob plans to revisit the US because of their research and leadership in

applied technologies within the global beef industry.

"I will also look at ways to encourage injured producers and farmers to remain actively involved within their business."

Rob's extensive injuries have made overseas travel a financial challenge.

Needing three carers to travel with him, Rob is raising money to cover the huge costs of the second leg of his overseas journey.

And what better way than to take a stroll through his own backyard.

Rob, along with his three carers and family and friends, will take on this epic journey through the desert landscape, a mighty 730km from the Suplejack homestead to Alice Springs.

'In the saddle' for six hours a day, Rob has allowed 24 days to complete this personal challenge in the hopes of raising enough funds to see him through the rest of his overseas travels.

They will witness some of the country's most beautiful sunrises and sunsets, camp by an open fire, feast on Suplejack beef and rely only on solar and generated power to get them to their destination.

Rob will be the first quadriplegic to cross the Tanami Desert in a powered 4 x 4 wheelchair.



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