

Round three to the virus

Garter, n.: An elastic band intended to keep a woman from coming out of her stockings and desolating the country

Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*, 1911

Operation Garter, a program to counter unplanned virus spread, had been carefully developed with a potential escape from Wardang Island in mind. Richard Downward, who was closely involved in developing the scheme, had coined the name for obvious reasons. Wardang Island lies on the western side of Yorke Peninsula which, like Italy, is roughly the shape of a human leg; consequently, any quarantine cordon placed across it would inevitably be seen as a garter.

At that moment, only the tip of Point Pearce where the virus had been detected was under quarantine restrictions. The Chief Veterinary Officer for South Australia took full charge of operations and the uncontrolled spread of RHDV was treated as though it was an exotic disease outbreak. The declaration of a quarantine zone around the outbreak area coincided with the arrival of scores of volunteers from different parts of South Australia who came to help. My responsibilities lay in collecting rabbits within the quarantined zone to determine whether or not the virus was still spreading, while the growing team of people from local and state government organisations began searching over a much wider areas to detect any signs of disease spread.

Many years later, Peter Michelmore recounted his experiences as someone who had offered to help with Operation Garter. His recollections dwelt mostly on the bizarre and the humorous. One of his first jobs was to help pack the putrefying, road-kill carcase of a 30 kg hairy-nosed wombat into a large plastic bag. It was to be laboratory-tested to allay fears that the virus was spreading to species other than rabbits. Precisely why the collectors imagined that the whole carcase would be needed, rather than a few carefully selected tissue samples, remains one of those unfathomable mysteries.

Peter also recalled long hot days spent searching in an area when numerous dead rabbits, suggesting further RHD spread, raised a false alarm. It turned out they were victims of myxomatosis rather than RHD. Top-most in Peter's memories was the camaraderie and jokes between people thrown together in that way.

'That night', he said, 'when I took off my boots, my socks smelled so bad after tramping around all day that my room-mate, Robin Hood (yes, his real name), decided they must have caught RHD and died. So he double-sealed them in biosecurity bags, labelled the package with the date and hotel's precise latitude and longitude, and sent them off among all the other samples destined for laboratory testing.'

Unfortunately, it seems, the volunteers' sense of humour had not been infectious enough to travel along with the socks. The package certainly didn't enliven the specimen receptionist