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# Police Journal



## Stopping COVID at the border

“... they’ll argue with you about the fact that they’re essential travellers when they just don’t fit into the category.”



Probationary Constable Emma Berry  
on night shift at Checkpoint Glenburnie.



# Stopping COVID at the border

By Brett  
Williams



The battle to keep COVID-19 out of South Australia has kept police guarding our borders for the past five months. They have suffered long absences from their families, weather extremes, bodily injuries and, of course, the risk of contracting the virus.



**“You can’t just grab some security guards and put a ramp across the road. It doesn’t work like that.”**

**S**ENIOR CONSTABLE SEANAGH O’LOUGHLIN ended up in Mount Gambier Hospital for five hours with a serious dog bite to her hand. It was an unlikely encounter and injury for a cop working a border checkpoint in the deep south-east of South Australia last month.

But an elderly man seeking entry to SA, through the Nelson checkpoint, had not been able to wind down his driver’s window. So O’Loughlin had to speak with him through a rear window.

And in the back seat of the car was the man’s dog. It attacked and left Southern District-based O’Loughlin with a “crunched nerve” and numbness.

“It was just one of those weird things,” she says. “The dog sort of came out and lunged at me and bit my fingers.”

Nonetheless, her wounds healed, and she got back to work in both static and roving capacities. Roving, as she was in Penola last month, she encountered three Melbourne men who had entered South Australia by an unmonitored backroad.

It was before the hard-border closure of July 29, but restrictions were still in place. The men denied knowledge of their obligations and told O’Loughlin how they thought the absence of cops on the backroad meant they could enter the state.

“I gave each of them a fine,” she says. “\$1,062 each.”

Now, after five months of border-control work, necessitated by COVID-19, cops have similar experiences to speak of and perceptions to share.

Limestone Coast Crime Prevention senior constable Steph Rickard has worked on checkpoints since their late-March implementation.

Handling drivers’ licences, passports, and other documents has become one of her dreads. The mother-of-two has known that with the exchange of plastic and paper comes the risk of transmitting COVID-19.

“And you have to hold (each item) in order to see it,” she says. “Then you’ve just got to be very careful about sanitizing straight afterwards and making sure you’re not touching your face.”



**“I’ve got all my bush camping gear, so I’m cooking everything out here for myself.”**

Not lost on Road Policing Section senior constable Tim Peacock are the risks of hours-long exposure to the elements, including sometimes minus temperatures.

Rolling fog, icy winds, and rain that belts across the landscape horizontally have been common in the south-east during the current winter. The minimum temperature on one recent Mount Gambier morning fell to minus 0.9 degrees.

Peacock is certain he and his colleagues would have frozen at night had a generous farmer not dropped off firewood to their Hynam checkpoint.

“The local population around Naracoorte has been fantastic,” he says.

Holden Hill sergeant Daniel Guzej spent his first day on a checkpoint with ADF personnel at Kybybolite last month.

He already had the experience of civil unrest and community uncertainty. It came from his time on the front line of protests at Roxby Downs and in Brisbane during the G20 summit in 2014.

But guarding a state border with camo-clad soldiers – during a pandemic – struck him as a “different chapter” altogether in policing.

“I probably wouldn’t have envisaged it,” he says. “It’s (a case of) using us for a service that sort of applies and sort of doesn’t. But who else is going to do it?”

“You can’t just grab some security guards and put a ramp across the road. It doesn’t work like that.”

Lameroo brevet sergeant Rhys Sinclair had never thought it possible that he would spend months working Riverland border crossings, backed up by the military. He accepts that “it has to be done” and that “we (police) need to do it”.

Murray Mallee LSA sergeant John Gardner has seen some travellers who, without crossing borders, have transacted business at checkpoints.

That practice could have worked for one traveller who, with some form of diplomatic status, sought to enter SA to sell a car. But he was not an essential traveller, so police had to refuse him entry after he had driven 1,000-odd kilometres.

“He was obviously upset but I don’t know that he was angry or aggressive toward police,” Gardner says. “He was just simply (seeking entry) to sell a car, and there are other ways you can do that.”

“We’ve had people actually do transactions here (at checkpoints) and that was offered to him: to get the person who’s buying the car to come here. That didn’t work out for him.”

**Facing page:** Constable Nathan Fisher directs traffic into Checkpoint Glenburnie; **top left:** Senior Constable Tim Peacock speaks with a traveller at Checkpoint Hynam and, **above,** with Police Association president Mark Carroll; **top right:** Senior Constable Michael Krawczyk checks a traveller’s details at Checkpoint Hynam.



“Often they won’t be able to give you an address and they’ll decide, of their own volition, to head back across the border.”



**Facing page:** **Left:** ADF personnel at Checkpoint Wolseley to assist police; **centre:** an aerial view of Checkpoint Glenburnie; **below left:** a vehicle entering Checkpoint Pine Hill; **below right:** Checkpoint Kybybolite.

The first border-control edict came on March 24. It sounded a bit like a military action a government would order to protect its country from a powerful aggressor.

Cops were to head out to, and occupy, state border crossings to stop an invisible, life-threatening invader. It was a war against COVID-19.

And, as in any war, the task was to come without glamour, romance, or anything like the comforts of home. At some sites, cops initially went without fridges and microwave ovens for food storage and cooking during 12-hour shifts.

Says Tim Peacock: "I've got all my bush camping gear, so I'm cooking everything out here for myself. It means I don't have to go and buy pre-cooked food or live (solely) on microwave food."

Shelter at a typical site last month, on a major SA highway or a lonely backroad, consisted of an ATCO hut and/or a marquee. A table might be - and was at one site - fashioned out of a wooden pallet and log stumps.

Among other modest amenities were chairs, lighting, portaloos, and logs for campfires which burned through the night.

Says John Gardner: "We certainly haven't had a problem here (in Renmark) because we've been doing it (checkpoints) for so long. But, originally, we didn't have anything much.



"In a lot of cases, we're not so much turning them back as giving them a choice.

**We're saying: 'Well, you can come into the state, but you've got to self-isolate.' "**

"The first ATCO hut we had was on Wentworth-Renmark Road at Renmark North to cover New South Wales traffic. And it was just an ATCO hut that had an MRT, chairs, a portaloos and a generator. It's just that setting things up initially can be difficult."

For human support, police have had those members of the Australian Defence Force positioned with them at most sites. Rhys Sinclair speaks of them as "good company" and providers of "great assistance".

Of course, at the outset of the border-control effort, no one knew how travellers would respond to police checking their bona fides at checkpoints.

There was always scope for aggressive reactions by those who perceived control of their movement as government overreach. The hope was that the majority would show understanding and support.

But Rickard has copped veiled accusations of hypocrisy. On those occasions, travellers have challenged her about stepping right up to drivers' windows while, at the same time, police appeal for physical distancing.

**Above left:** Senior Constable Steph Rickard; **above right:** Brevet Sergeant Simon Hurling speaks with a traveller at Checkpoint Glenburnie.

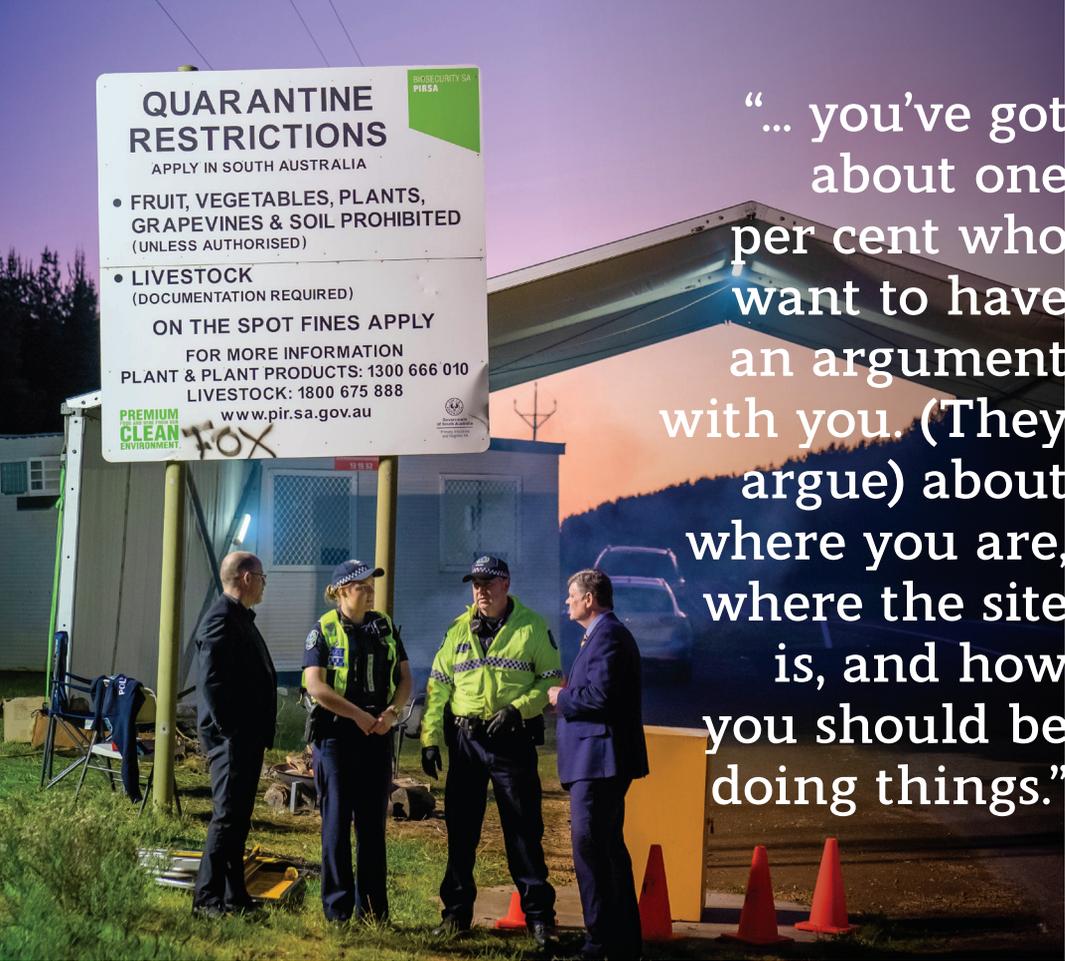
"That just comes down to practicality," she explains. "You can't hear what somebody's saying inside a car, in the (highway) traffic, unless you're prepared to get closer than 1.5 metres.

"And they'll argue with you about the fact that they're essential travellers when they just don't fit into the category.

"I did have a carload of girls who had come from Melbourne because they wanted to do some tourism in Mount Gambier.

"In a lot of cases, we're not so much turning them back as giving them a choice. We're saying: 'Well, you can come into the state, but you've got to self-isolate.'

"Often they won't be able to give you an address and they'll decide, of their own volition, to head back across the border."



“... you’ve got about one per cent who want to have an argument with you. (They argue) about where you are, where the site is, and how you should be doing things.”

In one case, a colleague of Rickard had to engage for more than an hour with an argumentative former resident of Mount Gambier. He had come from Melbourne and, without essential traveller status, insisted the police should permit him entry to SA.

“That was quite stressful for my colleague,” Rickard says. “Eventually (the traveller) stated that he would head back across the border. But we did have to get patrol to follow him because we didn’t believe he was going to comply.”

From her experience, Rickard breaks down the traveller reactions into three categories.

“I’d say 90 per cent of people who come through are great,” she says. “Then you’ve got probably nine per cent who are a bit cross that you’re holding them up.

“And then you’ve got about one per cent who want to have an argument with you. (They argue) about where you are, where the site is, and how you should be doing things.”

Daniel Guzej recently listened politely to a local who, for 20-odd

minutes, explained why he thought the border-control action was excessive.

“He had made his point after one minute, but I listened to him for 19 more and he left happily,” Guzej recalls.

Renmark senior constable first class Steve Alexander has worked Riverland checkpoints since March. He has found around 80 per cent of travellers “compliant and understanding”.

“But,” he says, “you get that 20 per cent that will be apprehensive and sometimes not so nice.”

Mount Gambier constable Nathan Fisher has served at checkpoints for five months. Since March, he has encountered only a few travellers with bad attitudes.

“But I don’t think their problem’s with us (police),” he says. “I think their problem is with the process or with something else beyond their control.”

Of course, in their front-line role on checkpoints, police have themselves faced the risk of contracting COVID-19. Processing thousands of border-crossing travellers has made that outcome a genuine possibility.

**Above:** Probationary Constable Emma Berry and Brevet Sergeant Simon Hurling speak with Police Association president Mark Carroll (right) and assistant secretary Steve Whetton at Checkpoint Glenburnie.

Still, cops have gone – and continue to go – about checkpoint duties with their characteristic stoicism.

“I don’t think it’s been such a big problem but it’s a risk you take,” SPSB Investigation Section constable Brett Sellar says. “I think it’s always going to be in the back of your mind.”

John Gardner recalls that, at the outset of the border closures, cops were not wearing “full protective gear”.

“Now,” he says, “the direction is we’ve got to have safety glasses, a mask and gloves every time we’re having interaction with people. So, I don’t think there really is an issue.”

If there is an issue, it is mask-wearing, according to Steph Rickard, who does think about the risk of infection.

“I’m often adjusting my mask because it slips down or slips up,” she says. “So I find myself touching my face a lot more and, therefore, having to sanitize and change my gloves a lot more often.”

Of the cops who have volunteered to serve on checkpoints many have had to leave their families at short notice, work 12-hour shifts, and reside in country hotels.

Sturt-based senior constable first class David Williams responded to a Friday afternoon e-mail request for volunteers. To contribute to the checkpoint effort in the south-east, he gave up annual leave he was to begin the following Monday.

Another example is Daniel Guzej, who has “a couple of needy children”, one of them an autistic 16-year-old, back home in suburban Adelaide.

And Guzej is willing to volunteer again if border-control organizers struggle for numbers.

“(But) if I do put my hand up again,” he says, “I’ll have to scrutinize those shifts to make sure (my family) have got support for when I’m away.”

Even for a local, like Steph Rickard, volunteering can come at a cost. She and her husband, Brevet Sergeant Randal Rickard, have both offered themselves up for “quite a few” 12-hour shifts in the coming months.

“So there’s going to be a lot of time when we’re not going to be home together to parent,” she says. “I think we’re shortly going to have quite the (personal) impact.”



**“That meant a lot. It makes you feel like what you’re doing is a bit more worthwhile.”**



Police Association president Mark Carroll toured the network of checkpoints in the south-east and the Riverland over four days in mid-July. He emerged with glowing assessments of the “selfless attitudes” with which he had seen association members working.

“For the way they’ve responded to this once-in-a-generation health crisis, our members deserve so much credit,” he insists.

“To, in some cases, leave your home and family and pit yourself against COVID-19, on our most critical front lines, shows extraordinary character.

“I took it as a privilege to speak with every association member at the checkpoints and police stations I visited.

“Their overwhelming attitude was that of accepting the situation, and simply getting on with the job of protecting their state. Every South Australian owes them abundant gratitude.”

And gratitude has come in various forms. Nathan Fisher and Probationary Constable Emma Berry were working the Glenburnie checkpoint last month when a generous local dropped off doughnuts.

“For the most part, the locals are really good,” Fisher says. “And kids have drawn us pictures which we’ve got hung up at the station.”

**Top left:** Police Association president Mark Carroll at Checkpoint Hynam with Senior Constable Michael Krawczyk; **top right:** Emma Berry and Nathan Fisher at Checkpoint Glenburnie; **above:** a handwritten note, which children had attached to a treat for members at Checkpoint Hynam.

Rickard, too, speaks of people who “bring us coffee”, and senses that “we are actually valued and appreciated”.

“We had a foster child come through and she’d had police present when she was taken away from her natural parents,” Rickard recalls. “She would have been around 12, 13.

“I said hello to her, and the next time she came through I said hello again. She then started to use her

own pocket money to buy us some buns and coffees.

“That meant a lot. It makes you feel like what you’re doing is a bit more worthwhile.”

Ultimately, Rickard sees border-control work as necessary and suspects the “overwhelming majority” of her participating colleagues agree.

“Everybody’s just doing the best they can,” she says, “until we can get through to a better time of life, when we don’t have to man borders.”

**Senior Constable 1C Steve Alexander**  
CHECKPOINT YAMBA

"Thirty-three years ago, I didn't think I'd be doing this, but it's what needs to be done. That's fine. It's my role."

**Sergeant John Gardner**  
CHECKPOINT YAMBA

"We've got roving patrols. One that covers Renmark backroads, so that you can't sneak over the border, and one that does Pinnaroo."

**Constable Brett Sellar**  
CHECKPOINT BORDER FENCE ROAD

"I don't think it's been such a big problem (the risk of contracting the virus) but it's a risk you take. I think it's always going to be in the back of your mind."

**Senior Constable Damien Kschammer**  
CHECKPOINT WENTWORTH-  
RENMARK ROAD

"(The risk of contracting the virus) is always in the back of your mind but, obviously, we're in the PPE. And just being safe while you're (working a checkpoint) is the way to go."

# Cops on checkpoints

## THE SOUTH-EAST, July 14

**Senior Constable David Martin**  
CHECKPOINT PINE HILL

"So far, everyone has been okay. Only a few people have been turned around and they've accepted it. Everyone else has been really good."



**Senior Constable Seanagh O'Loughlin**  
CHECKPOINT WOLSELEY

"The army guys have been great because at some of the points, like this one, there's only going to be one of us and two army (personnel). And you wouldn't want to be stuck out here on your own at night, so it's great to have them."



**Senior Constable IC David Williams**  
CHECKPOINT WOLESELEY

"I volunteered for two stints and I just finished one. I could've just sat back and gone on annual leave, but I just decided to volunteer. The boss was happy to approve my annual leave to be delayed."

**Senior Constable Luke Bisignano**  
CHECKPOINT FRANCES

"Now, being in the job for 12 years, this is the first time I've been pulled away from my section to do anything. So, it's a bit out of the blue. I definitely didn't think I'd be doing this 12 months ago."



**Sergeant Daniel Guzej**  
CHECKPOINT KYBYBOLITE

"I just started, so I'm the most recent arrival. It's all day shifts (that I'm working), all week, 7am till 7pm, plus a little bit before and a bit after, so probably about 13 hours every day. They're reasonably long days."



**Senior Constable Tim Peacock**  
CHECKPOINT HYNAM

"I've come up at the moment because my kids are old enough that I don't have issues with school holidays. A lot of my colleagues have got kids home from school and this week was really difficult for them. So I said I'd go away and do the week."



**Constable Nathan Fisher**  
CHECKPOINT GLENBURNIE

"We're pretty visible and we're all pretty conscious of where people (drivers) are on the road. On night shift, it's bucketed down quite a few times, and that's when it gets a bit trickier. The rain takes away a bit of that visibility."



**Probationary Constable Emma Berry**  
CHECKPOINT GLENBURNIE

"It's a bit concerning because, when we do have Victorians coming in as cross-border community members, we're not sure of where they're going or what they're doing."



**Senior Constable Steph Rickard**  
CHECKPOINT GLENBURNIE

"When you're dealing with people who are pleasant and supportive, it certainly makes your shift easy. But, when you have to get into an argument with someone who's being really unpleasant, it certainly makes the rest of the shift harder." PJ

Aerial view of Checkpoint Glenburnie.