Test Your Expedition Party
Stuart’s expedition was successful because of his experience, careful planning, discipline, bush skills and persistence. However, he laid down strict rules for his party.
If your ‘expedition party’ would like to travel by Stuart’s rules, first nominate a leader, plan your expedition, select an experienced surveyor and appointed machine (skilled in map making), and ensure all participants are aware of the rules.

Rules Enforced by Supply Officer
- Nothing to be taken out of bags without the Stock Control Officer’s knowledge.
- When anything is removed from a pack it is to be packed up in the same manner as it was found.
- Each pair of bags to be of equal weight.
- Riding horses saddled first and everything belonging to them placed on the saddles.

Rules Enforced by Expedition Leader
- Officers to see that orders to be reported by the leader.
- The officers will ensure that every man does an equal share of work.
- No horses are to be abused, kicked, or struck about the head.
- Everyone must be up at break of day, the bedclothes etc to be done up and put into their proper places.
- Horses brought in and unhobbled.
- No one to leave the line of march without the leaders knowledge (or his Officer-in-charge).
- When leaving the camp no one is to go without arms and ammunition.
- No one is to fire on natives without orders unless in self defense.
- No swearing or improper language.
- No journal to be kept or notes taken (except the Naturalist).
- Saddles are not to be sat upon (except when on a horse).
- Anyone detached on special duty from camp or on the march must report himself on his return.

Rules Enforced by Stock Control Officer
- When anything is removed from a pack it is to be packed up in the same manner as it was found.
- Each pair of bags to be of equal weight.
- Breakfast to be ready at the same time for which an ½ hour will be allowed.
- Riding horses saddled first and everything belonging to them placed on the saddles.
- When on the march, no water is to be used from the canteens without permission from the leader.

Rules Enforced by Expedition Leader
- Officers to see that orders to be promptly and willingly obeyed. Any disobedience, disagreement or neglect of duty must at once be reported to the leader.
- The officers will ensure that every man does an equal share of work.
- No horses are to be abused, kicked, or struck about the head.
- Everyone must be up at break of day, the bedclothes etc to be done up and put into their proper places.
- Horses brought in and unhobbled.
- No one to leave the line of march without the leaders knowledge (or his Officer-in-charge).
- When leaving the camp no one is to go without arms and ammunition.
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An Epic Journey

Stuart’s last expedition party was larger than his previous parties. It consisted of 72 horses and 10 men: Stuart (Commander), William Kelkew (2nd in Command), Francis Thring (3rd Officer, Cadet Surveyor), William Auld (Assistant), Stephen King Jr, John Billiat, James Frew Jnr, Heath Nash, John McGorrerey (Shoeing Smith), Frederick Waterhouse (Government Naturalist).

They officially left North Adelaide on 25th October 1861. When they reached the previous camp at Newcastleton where they rested the horses for a week before attempting to cross Stuart’s Plains. Stuart scouted ahead finding waterholes, creeks, springs and rivers, which he named after his exploration party. As they neared the coast they followed what we now know as the Mary River, camped near what is now Mistake Billabong and Shady Camp. Then, via a similar route to today’s Pt Stuart 4WD track, they reached the northern coastal floodplains.

‘The sea has been reached’

On 24th July 1862, Stuart rode ahead on the coastal plains, he could hear the sea. The rest of the party crossed the plains and entered the thick monsoon vine forest. The party continued onto the beach and were ‘gratified and delighted to behold the water of the Indian Ocean in Van Diemen Gulf.’ Stuart dipped his feet then washed his face and hands in the sea. Stuart noted in his journal: ‘...the beach is not above four feet above the level of the sea. I can see to the horizon to the east the dim shade of the land on the west side of the mouth of the Alligator River which has some high sand hills on it.’

To mark the place where they reached the coast, Stuart had his initials JMDJS carved into a large tree. They camped near a small running creek to allow their horses time to graze. Stuart named this Thring Creek in appreciation for Francis Thring’s ‘...conduct throughout the journey.’

The next morning Stuart Thring out to scout ahead and find a way around the boggy wetlands to the mouth of the river. Thring returned with news that it was far too boggy for the horses. Stuart, always conscious of the safety and well being of his expedition party, decided not to waste the strength of the horses on finding the mouth of what he thought was the Adelaide River. ... ‘the sea has been reached, which was the great object of the expedition, and a practicable route found through a splendid country from Newcastleton Waters to it, abounding, for a great part of the way, in running streams well stocked with fish; and this has been accomplished at a season of the year during which we have not had a drop of rain.’

Flag Raising

On the 25th July, exactly 9 months after their departure, Stuart’s party cleared an area and stripped the tallest mangrove tree. They raised a flag made by Elizabeth Chambers, daughter of James (expedition financier). The Union Jack had Stuart’s initials sewn in the middle. Stuart named the area Chambers Bay, in honour of Elizabeth and buried a box containing details of the expedition.

The Return Journey

Stuart was very ill, suffering terribly from the effects of scurvy, and secretly doubted he could survive the return journey. Auld took observations for him, because Stuart had lost the use of his hand. As the journey continued, Stuart lost the ability to ride, so, in a stretcher made by McGorrerey, the men carried Stuart between two horses for the last 576 km (960 km). Their care saved his life. After 5 months they returned, on 17th December 1862.

As an expedition leader, Stuart had travelled over 12,000 miles (about 20,000 km) in just over 4 years, usually under harsh conditions, with limited rations and little or poor water. Stuart’s Great Northern Exploring Expedition across the Continent: October 1861 - July 1862

expedition party and its 48 remaining horses were cheered down King William Street, and the people of Adelaide witnessed the biggest celebration of the town’s 26 years. Sadly, on the same day Victorians stood in silent tribute as the remains of Burke and Wills were laid to rest. Stuart received the £2,000 reward for reaching the coast, but his expedition ruined his health. He returned to Britain with his achievements meant little. He died in London on 5th June 1866 aged 50, and was buried at Kensal Green.

The Mystery of Stuart’s Tree

Stuart’s diaries stated he reached the coast west of the Adelaide River, rather than west of the Mary River. It was understandable that Stuart mistook his coastal position. He calculated latitude using the sun and stars, but without a chronometer, he could not accurately calculate longitude. Just half a degree of longitude separates the Adelaide and Mary Rivers. Also, he used a map produced from the Admiralty surveys of the Beagle in 1838-39 which identified the Adelaide River as the only river west of the Alligator Rivers. Interestingly, Waterhouse (government naturalist on the expedition) reported to the S.A. Parliament that he suspected they had travelled to the coast via a completely different river. In the 20 years it took to officially find the tree, there was doubt about Stuart’s success, although an NT Government resident report states that Wilna Aboriginal people remembered ‘...nothing touches one more than a truly brave man. We had the honour of having served one.’ Auld, Expedition Member

He was simply a marvel for horseback traverse. His map was so correct that we used simply to put a protractor and scale on it, get the bearing and distance, and ride with the same confidence as we would ride from Adelaide to Gawler.’ R. Knuckey, Overland Telegraph Line

Reflections on a Great Man

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people beneath Stuart’s Tree carved with large 2 ft (61 cm) initials. Photo Paul Fehrhegb. 1865.