The Hume & Hovell Ultra Marathon Run uses the Hume & Hovell Walking Track, constructed as a Bicentennial Project in 1988. The walking track managed by Department of Industry and Lands follows as closely as possible the historic route taken by explorers Hume & Hovell on their 1824 expedition to Port Phillip Bay. The walking track starts at Cooma Cottage near Yass and finishes at the Hovell Tree in Albury, some 440 km in length.

Gold mining relics and informative interpretive signs beside Burra Creek make the track extremely interesting, historically. Sections of boardwalk, a swinging bridge over Tumbarumba creek, a tunnel blasted with dynamite through 70m of granite in 1876 and views of the Australian Alps are just some of the interesting things to see along the way. The more open spaces are a favoured haunt for brumbies, and the area supports a large diverse bird population. The track has very steep sections, uneven under foot and protruding roots in places, and is a mixture of constructed walking track, 90% single trail and the rest on fire trails.

Pre-race
For the Hume & Hovell Ultra there were four events on offer; the 100 mile (162.8 km), 100km, 50km and 22km. I was originally only going down to pace and crew for Scotty who had entered the 100 mile event, to get a feel for the course and to see if it was worth training for, for next year. But after attending the briefing and working out the logistics, Jeff and Scotty talked me into entering, and then I could experience the course first hand and get a finisher’s medal. After the Oxfam 100km, time off to holiday in Western Australia, a disrupted schedule of recovery training and a look at the course elevation; the night before the start, I chose the 50km.

The 50km event starts at the Henry Angel Trackhead. A beautiful grassy campground ten minutes drive from Tumbarumba. The course
runs 6.5km north on an ‘out and back’, along the banks of Burra Creek towards Junction campsite. Hovell recorded in his journal in the 1800’s that this area was ‘an extensive swamp littered with wombat holes’. Move forward a couple of hundred years and the swamps have been sluiced away to win gold and the landscape has been hugely altered. After the turnaround and making your way back through Henry Angel, the course makes its way to the spring bridge crossing at Tumbarumba creek and then climbs into the Snowy Mountains, going up and over Mount Garland towards Mannus Lake, (the dam wall having recently been repaired after a complete wash away by a flood in 2012), to turn around and finish back at the Henry Angel Trackhead.

As I was going to be running in Australia’s Alpine region where the weather can be quite changeable, I had to add to the mandatory safety gear I had been carrying with me on previous trail runs. In a mad rush I went out and bought waterproof matches, a lightweight rain jacket with taped seams, and thermal top and bottoms. My ultra-vest suddenly looked very small to be carrying all this additional gear as well as all the usual paraphernalia I take on a trail run; water, food, space blanket, first aid and blister kits etc.

After a 5 hour drive from Sydney on Friday afternoon we attended the race briefing, compulsory Safety Equipment check and the buffet dinner put on at the local Tumbarumba Motel and then retired to the Tumbarumba Creek Caravan Park which had just finished building accommodation in anticipation of housing FIFO (fly in fly out) workers that will be constructing the multi-billion-dollar expansion of the Snowy Hydro scheme, building new tunnels and power stations providing renewable energy to the eastern states. The accommodation design was straight out of a Russian Gulag, looking more prison-like than comfy, it was heavy duty but functional and clean, as it had never been slept in and the furniture, fittings and bedding were brand new.

We had to get up at 04:30 to get Scotty to the 100 mile check-in at 05:45 with all his drop bags, so it was early to bed. My start time was 09:00. After we had seen Scotty off in the first light I went back to the accommodation to tape toes, strap ankles and get kitted up for a 50km trail run along the Hume & Hovell Track.

Stage 1 – Henry Angel Campground to Junction Campsite Check Point (13km) The event briefing at 8.45 gave me a chance to look around the Henry Angel campground in the light. When we cheered off Scotty it was still dark and the only light came from the fires in the braziers dotted around the starting race that were in turn surrounded by competitors and supporters all desperately trying to stay warm without setting fire
to highly inflammable running gear.

I was surprised to see a whole bunch of caravans cheek to jowl with the competition paraphernalia, start/finish arch, mobile cool room, porta-loos, timing mats and officials tents etc. It seems the race had invaded and set up on top of the resident grey nomads. Everyone seemed cheerful however and not in the least perturbed to find themselves in the middle of an ultra-marathon event. Maybe it was fun to find themselves in the middle of a 400 odd die hard trail runners. They were sitting on their camping chairs, with tussled hair and cups of tea passing on best wishes and calling out encouragement as we quietly rolled over the start line.

We ran north on single trail beside Burra Creek on farmland, dodging wombat holes and climbing over stiles that had been conveniently erected at each barbed wire fence. There were many of these stiles on the Track providing passage over the stock fencing. This was all well and good but each one had to be negotiated, climbed over and queued behind if there was a group. As the day wore on these stiles became harder and harder to negotiate as the legs became less steady. Stiles became less of a help and more of a hindrance (obstacle) as the day wore on. Mind you they did stop us having to squeeze through barbed wire fencing which is always a good thing.

Two nice ladies told us which way to turn around the Junction Campsite checkpoint cone (signing from left to right with frantic arm waving) and we were off back the way we had come to Henry Angel campground. I was running with three others at this point moving freely and getting to know my companions.

This stage took 1:16 hours. Even with the mountain in the middle this should take no more than 7:00 hours. How hard could it be? Back in bed by 17:00 in the afternoon for a quick snooze before going to help out Scotty through the night.

Stage 2 – Henry Angel Campground to Mt Garland (12.8km)
After a very quick loo stop I was off. Unfortunately as soon as I stopped I lost contact with the other three and I was on my own. I ran under the Tooma Road bridge, following the track along the creek, for about 5 km. I filled my water bottles at an unmanned aid station at this point as I had read that from here on it became quite “hilly” and uneven under foot. It was actually very steep, hot and the mountain air very dry. I was drinking water and electrolyte at an alarming rate.
I found and successfully crossed the swing bridge, and started the 350m climb up Mt Garland. By this time there were a number of the 100km runners making their way back down the mountain at an alarming rate with trekking poles akimbo, trying to maintain balance on a dusty rock strewn trail that had the mountain on one side and a precipitous drop down into the creek on the other. This was definitely single trail, so the best idea was to step aside until they had thundered past and then get on with the long trudge to the top. Fleeting words of encouragement and thanks were offered by everyone on the way past. So polite.

I ran out of water about 2km from the top, even after what I thought was pretty severe rationing. I think I am going to have to carry safety reserves in a bladder on these runs from now on. Running out of water is no fun and the last push to the top was very thirsty work.

This stage took 2:12hours. I was at the halfway point and it had only taken me 3:30 hours and it was downhill from here. 7:00 hours tops!

Stage 3 –Mt Garland to Manus Lake (8.2km)
After drinking some flat coke (yuck) and lots of water and filling up both my totally empty water bottles I set down Mt Garland at a trot. The shoe was on the other foot now and the people climbing the hill stood aside as I ran down with a polite “good work” and “thanks” to everyone on the way past. My legs were a little tired after the long climb, but I was moving freely and enjoying the breeze as I ran down the trail dodging in and out of the mountain eucalypt trees.

The decent was very steep in sections, rocky and fairly dusty. I made it to the bottom of the hill, crossed some farmland and at the Manus Valley Bed & Breakfast, joined the dirt road that ran beside the lake after crossing yet another stile. With Manus Lake on my left I ran along the road, crossing very carefully over two cattle grids (ankle traps), making my way to the turnaround point and back to the Manus Lake checkpoint.

The road was covered in light coloured gravel and a cream dust that reflected the sun, raising the apparent temperature to past 26 degrees. The absence of shade and the dust that rose from the passing vehicles made this 6km section particularly unpleasant though the outlook over the water was amazing and particularly enticing to a hot and thirsty runner.
This stage took 1:26 hours. Only 18km to go but I was a few minutes shy of 5 hours to this point. Doubts were starting to set in. Maybe I wouldn’t make the finish in 7:00 hours. There was still that rotten mountain in the way!

Stage 4 – Manus Lake to Mt Garland (4.2km)

I passed a safety gear check at the checkpoint where they made sure I was carrying my head torch and reflective vest just in case I was still on the trail after nightfall (I was certain that would not happen) and then I was off back on the dirt road back toward the Manus Valley Bed & Breakfast.

And then it was the same again, but in reverse. Mount Garland seemed much steeper this time around. The good thing was we were all moving in the same direction so I didn’t have to stand aside for downhill runners but by about halfway up I would have welcomed that as an excuse for a rest. My legs were starting to shake with the constant uphill effort and it got to the point where I was tramping upward for 100 steps and having a little breather and then another 100. At one point I stopped to watch an echidna slowly amble across the trail, beckoning to a lady behind me to come up slowly to see. After we watched it wander off the trail and into the trees she took off in front of me, apologising for passing me. I assured her as she disappeared up the mountain that she was more than welcome and to save me a spot at the finish.

Other people passing all stopped and asked if I was okay, and if I had everything I needed. Trail runners and especially the ultra-trail running vibe is so different from road running. There is much more of a reliance on other competitors, a closer bond and a greater emphasis on finishing rather than the time taken. There are so many more variables in trail running, much more that can go wrong when you are out there battling the terrain, weather and inner demons and this leads to a reliance on, and greater comradery between competitors. I equate this to the lone yachtsman and helping out a fellow mariner in distress. It is a refreshing throwback in this ultra-competitive, don’t give a crap for your fellowman world.

I struggled back up Mt Garland. This stage took 54 minutes, though it seemed much, much longer. Only 12.8km to go but my legs were very shaky and I still had to get down off the mountain. Goodbye to the 7:00 hour goal.

Stage 5 – Mt Garland to Henry Angel Campground (12.8km)

I had a 15 minute break at the Mt Garland checkpoint chatting to the volunteers, trying to get my legs into some semblance of order before setting off down the other side of the mountain. After the day’s abuse, with over 400 runners traversing the mountain both ways and the 22km participants having completed the route once, the trail was very cut up with lots of loose rock and fine dust that made the footing very slippery. I was very tentative on the trail down to the swing bridge. A slip here could have serious consequences and at this stage I was more concerned with finishing than making my self-imposed 7:00 hour goal, which even I acknowledged at this point, was a lost cause.

Stubbing my right foot hard into a rock on the way down and the sudden fight for balance caused my left leg to cramp up. This set of a comical alternating chain of hopping, cursing, cramping, waving arms about to gain balance, events as I continued my headlong trajectory down the mountain that lasted a good ten metres until I found the brakes and came to a stop. Just what I needed an adrenaline hit! That will teach me to lift my legs. After my heart rate quieted down a
little, I hobbled off a little slower still, knowing I had probably lost another toenail to the joys of trail running.

I couldn’t help thinking that this was much more physically demanding than the Oxfam 100km even though it was only half the distance, and started to use all the little mind tricks to keep moving forward. Even after the mishap, I still must have been moving at a reasonable pace as I wasn’t passed on this section (or maybe there was no one left to pass me) and made it to the swing bridge in one piece.

The climb out of the Tumbarumba Creek Gorge from the swing bridge was one to forget. The climb is almost 3km in length and even though it is only 170m of vertical elevation it seemed to go on and on. My legs had given up complaining and were now hollering out to stop, but I was so very close to the finish and trudging on was the only option.

Reaching Burra Creek lifted the spirits and I broke into a tired jog for a few hundred metres and then decided ease back into a steady trekking pace to enjoy the scenery, watch the antics of the sheep with their new born lambs and climb stile after stile all the way back to the finish at the Henry Angel Campground.

I managed to raise a slow trot around the campground to enter the finish race and cross the line making sure I rang the decorative cowbell hanging under the finish arch on the way through, to the cheers of the waiting crowd.

I finished after 8 hours 46 minutes and 37 seconds out on course. I missed my finish goal by 1 hour and 46 minutes, coming 52nd out of 63 competitors.
Post-Race
After some fantastic tomato and herb soup and a sausage sandwich provided by the Wagga Wagga Road Runners, Jeff found me with all the other 50km finishers cheering in the stragglers (I can say that, seeing as I wasn’t last), just as the shadows were starting to lengthen and the braziers were being fired up to provide warmth to those still in shorts, tee shirts and a thin veneer of dust and sweat from the day’s exertions. We drove back to the Gulag and I had a shower and a sleep in preparation of a long cold night close to the top of Mt Granite at the Pines checkpoint supporting Scotty in his 100 miler attempt.

We drove up to the Pines checkpoint at 23:30 ready to spend the night in Jeff’s Landcruiser wrapped in a blanket from the Gulag. Scotty appeared out of the cold and dark at 02:30 on Sunday morning after completing 112km and the gruelling climb down into and back out of Buddong Falls. I made him sit by the fire and got some hot noodle soup and tea into him, topped up his fluid reserves and sent him off with Jeff (who was on pacing duties) on the 19km leg ‘out and back’ to Mt Granite.

After a chilly snooze in the Landcruiser, I woke up and decided to sit near the campfire chatting to the other support crews as we all waited patiently for our charges to appear. Scotty and Jeff walked out of the half-light at 06:30 in the morning, their head torches flickering through the trees. 131 km finished, only 31km to go for Scotty. Jeff wasn’t prepared to tackle the last 31km so I made Scotty eat and drink some hot food by the fire, replenished his ultra-vest and made sure he had everything he needed to get him to the finish. After half an hour he pushed his way up out of the chair, gave a tired smile and walked off into the trees. Jeff and I drove down off the mountain to grab a cup of coffee and a breakfast pie from the Tumbarumba Bakery, and another snooze in the Gulag until we estimated it was time to get back to Henry Angel Campground to watch Scotty finish.

Scotty crossed the finish line at 11:28 to rapturous clanging of the cowbell (run by a willing helper). A 100 mile (162km) ultra-trail in a time of 29 hours 28 minutes and 49seconds. Coming in 14th out of 24. Legend!