**TRAVELLING SOUTH**

I was near the end of my month-long trip around Australia and was booked on a British Airways flight back to London in four days’ time.

Wishing to see some of the countryside from the ground rather than from the air, I had reserved a sleeping cabin on the “Sunlander.”

The Sunlander, a comfortable passenger train, runs from Cairns in the north to Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, in the south, a distance of 1,700 kilometres.

The journey takes two full days and nights and follows the east coast of Australia through cane fields, banana plantations and dairy farms, through rain forests, mountain ranges and open plains until it reaches Brisbane.

To the uninitiated, the journey is fascinating, not only for the beauty of the scenery, but also for the variety of fellow travellers you meet.

I have made this trip once now so am an authority on train travel in Australia.



I don’t think the fellow travellers on my journey south were unusual in any way to those on any other journey, to other Australians at least.

However, they certainly were unusual, to me, a tourist from Cambridge, England.

I had booked *a sleeper*, a small, private cabin containing two bunks in the hope that I would be the sole occupant on this long trip.

But as I entered the little cabin is saw that an elderly gentleman was seated by the window.

“Hello young fellow.” He said. “Are you travelling to Brisbane?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Me too. I guess we had better get to know each other.” Holding out his hand he said, “My name is Theodore.”

“Hello Theodore. My name is Rupert.”

“Nice to meet you, Rupert. Do I detect an accent?” He asked.

“Yes. I’m from Cambridge in England. It’s nice to meet you too, Theodore.”

I noticed that Theodore was well dressed and groomed.

He wore a light coloured suit and tie, a pressed shirt and polished shoes.

I thought that this outfit was a bit unsuitable for a long train journey but didn’t comment on it, not wishing to start up a conversation.

I estimated his age at around 80 or 85 but noticed that his skin, although tanned by the bright Australian sun, was relatively free of wrinkles.

His eyes were bright blue and his white hair sported a cow lick.

My lack of conversation didn’t matter because Theodore soon launched into the story of his long life.

I now lamented my decision to travel by train and my added misfortune at having been relegated to this cabin with this talkative old man.

I made an effort to shut him out while trying to study my chemistry notes but it was no use, so I actually started to listen to his tale.

And what a tale he told.

It started when he was a young boy growing up on a far-flung cattle station, “Mammoth Bend,” in the Palmer River district of far north Queensland.

Mammoth Bend covered an area of close to 1,000 square miles and grazed up to 20,000 head of cattle.

Theodore was the fourth son of the Manager, Harold Browning and his wife, Bonny.

Harold too had grown up on Mammoth Bend, his father being the manager before him.

By the time Theodore was six years old he was out riding horses and mustering with his older brothers and the aboriginal stockmen.

He was schooled to the sixth grade by the School of the Air broadcast from Cairns to dozens of children residing on outback cattle properties.

Most of his long sunny days were on horseback mustering with the stockmen or in the cattle yards drafting or branding clean-skin calves.

His childhood was carefree and always exciting.

Theodore told me of the various tragedies that had befallen his family.

The one that he said affected him the most was the death of his oldest brother, Clem.

Clem was ten years older than Theodore and Theodore adored him.

Clem was everything that a young boy aspired to be: strong, handsome and courageous.

Too courageous as it turned out.

Clem, like many young men, had the belief that he was indestructible and one sad day he was proven wrong.

Along with his other brothers, Clem broke in the new, young horses readying them for stock work.

One strong young colt proved to be more than a match for Clem refusing to bend to the young man’s will.

When Clem was trying, with a halter and lead, to get this young cold to face up to him, his father, Harold, with Theodore by his side, watched the action carefully.

Harold knew horses as well as any man, and there was something about this fiery yearling that had him concerned.

It was the look of contempt in the black eyes and the way he held his head defiantly seemingly challenging his son to dare to control him.

Harold was just about to step into the yard and take over from his seventeen year old son when suddenly the horse lifted his front legs high in the air, hopped two paces forward on his hind legs and stuck out at Clem with his front hooves.

One hoof struck Clem hard in the forehead sending him flying backwards onto the ground.

Blood gushed from the gaping wound as Harold clambered over the railing and ran to his son.

Theodore slipped through the railings and joined his father.

There was nothing either one of them could do.

Clem was dead. His blue eyes glazed over and covered in dust.

Harold let out an agonising cry, “Clem! No. No Clem.” As he cradled his dead son’s head in his arms.

But Clem was past hearing.

Gently Harold laid the lad’s head back down on the earth, slowly stood and glared at the proud young gelding.

Harold drew the revolver that he always carried, aimed it at the horse and pulled the trigger.

The shot echoed around the railings and the horse dropped dead at his feet.

The next tragedy came when his mother died of cancer.

“You know Rupert, I still miss her to this day.” Said Theodore.

By the time we reached Townsville, Theodore had told me that he got his pilot’s licence when he was just seventeen.

He claimed he paid for it by shooting and trapping dingoes on Mammoth Bend.

Ok. So now I was starting to doubt his story.

Sure, the death of a brother and a mother I could swallow, but a 17 year old from the back of beyond learning to fly an aeroplane? I didn’t think so.

I had been caught before by Australians spinning me a yarn and I wasn’t about to be caught again.

I had discovered, to my embarrassment, that it was a peculiarity of the Aussie sense of humour to tell strangers great tales which invariably included themselves as the hero.

The last time this happened to me was when I was in Sydney.

I had gone for a walk around the dock area of Sydney Harbour and checked out the Opera House.

I was getting thirsty so I stopped into a pub nearby.

I happened to sit beside a fellow who introduced himself as Stevo.

Like most Australians, Stevo was very friendly and talkative.

After a couple of beers, he told me a story about his life in London a few years back.

He said he had a job as bodyguard to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Second.

I had no reason to doubt his story and the more I seemed eager to hear more, the more outrageous the story became.

I really started to question the validity of his story when he told me that he had saved the Monarch’s life from a group of terrorists who tried to kidnap her.

When finally I said, “That’s enough Stevo, I don’t believe a word of it.”

He seemed disappointed but conceded he had taken the story a bit far.

“Why did you tell me that unbelievable story Steve?” I asked.

“It’s just a bad habit we Australians have.

It’s a game we play with strangers to see how big a lie we can tell before we get found out.

We don’t mean any harm by it.”

My lesson learnt, I was determined that Theodore was not going to catch me in this way, and his yarn was clearly a trap for the unwary.

I could have stopped him then and there by saying, “Give it a break Theodore, I didn’t come down in the last shower you know.”

But I didn’t.

Mainly because his story, though clearly bull shit, was quite interesting and it helped pass the time.

My plan was to turn the joke back on Theodore when he finally finished his great narrative.

So I just let Theo continue recounting his life of make-believe waiting for the conclusion.

After all, I had plenty of time to kill.

We took breaks for breakfast, lunch and dinner then back to the story which became more fanciful as it went on.

Theo told me that, at the age of 19, he joined the 92nd Squadron of the Royal Air Force at the start of World War Two and was based at Biggin Hill, south of London.

(“Yeah, right.”)

However, I was momentarily confounded when he detailed the engine, the speed and other features of the Spitfire.

Then I realized that anyone could look up those details in an aviation magazine.

By the morning of the second day of our journey to Brisbane, Theo had launched into the most fanciful part of his make-believe life.

Not only had he joined the Royal Air Force, but now he was flying missions over occupied France!

Ok. So I had to hide a sarcastic smile and allow him to give himself plenty of rope so that, at the end of his flight of fancy, I could say, “Great story Theo, but unfortunately I haven’t believed a word of it since you said you became a pilot.”

That would be the sudden jerk which would hang the lying old scoundrel.

So I continued on expressing amazement at Theo’s story: “I see.” “Oh, my goodness!” “However did you do that?” Etcetera.

I thought that the more I encouraged Theo to *think* that I believed his outrageous story, the more extraordinary it would become and so the greater his shock would be when I told him I hadn’t believed a word of it.

And I was right.

For now….. he had not only flown missions over France in a Spitfire with the RAF, but he had also got shot down by German anti-aircraft fire.

Me: “What rotten luck!”

To continue: Theo’s Spitfire crashed and burst into flames but he was quick enough to eject before it hit the ground.

“Thank goodness!” (Me again.)

He said he had landed in a corn field close to a small village called Breilly to the west of Amiens.

Theodore said he now knew that this part of France was occupied by enemy troops. (Having just been shot down by them presumably.)

He quickly gathered up his parachute and stuffed it between the corn furrows.

He then started running towards a farm house nearby hoping to seek shelter from the Germans.

Before he arrived at the house a young woman came out to meet him.

She quickly grabbed him by the hand and led him into the small farm house.

Inside, a number of people, obviously family members, were standing about with worried looks on their faces.

In the middle of the living room floor sat a wooden coffin.

The girl bent down and lifted the lid indicating for Theo to get inside the empty box.

Theo wasted no time in doing as he was told.

He then heard the sound of a hammer obviously driving nails into the coffin lid.

Later Theo discovered that the coffin was made by the farmer’s son for a neighbour who had recently died.

The quick-witted daughter thought that the coffin would make a good hiding place for the Allied pilot.

She was right.

Five German soldiers burst into the living room shouting something in German.

Of course nobody understood them but all knew exactly what they were saying.

The family members simply looked from one to the other and demonstrated their lack of understanding.

The German corporal became angry and started throwing furniture around and directed his men to search the other rooms of the house.

Having found nothing, he kicked the coffin in annoyance and they all left.

The young woman sent her little brother outside to make sure the Germans didn’t return.

When the coast was clear, the father used the hammer to claw the nails out of the lid.

Theodore stood up smiling and saying, “Thank you. Thank you.”

“Vous êtes tres bienvenus. (You are very welcome.”) Said the father.

That night Theodore was treated to a delicious home-cooked meal with his French saviours.

After dinner Theodore sat and talked to the family whose name he discovered was Puissant.

He discovered to his surprise that, although Mister and Misses Puissant and their son, François could not speak a word of English, their daughter, Joelle, could converse quite well.

When her parents and brother went to bed, Joelle and Theodore continued talking until late into the night.

Theodore found Joelle charming and very knowledgeable about the course of the war.

In fact she told him that six British pilots who were shot down a few days ago were being held by the Germans in a barn about three miles distant from the Puissant’s farm.

This information pricked Theodore’s interest.

Maybe, he thought, I could work out a way to free them.

So the very next night he had Joelle show him the way to the barn where his comrades were held captive.

He realized that it would be impossible to get past the guards standing watch at each corner of the shed as well as the door of the building.

But it may not be too difficult if he was dressed in a German officer’s uniform.

But where to get a German officer’s uniform?

Joelle had a suggestion, “In the village of Breilly,” she said, “there is a German Captain resident in the small hotel.

I saw him there when I went to the market on Saturday. I’m sure he will still be there.

All you would have to do is climb into his room via the window when he is asleep and take his clothing.”

“Oh. Is that all?” Laughed Theodore.

But it really was a brilliant idea.

So later that night, Joelle and Theodore again walked the few miles to Breilly and secreted themselves behind the hotel.

Before long a light went on in one of the upstairs windows.

With the curtains pulled back they could see the German Captain undressing and hanging his uniform on a clothes stand.

They then waited until midnight when everyone was sure to be asleep.

Joelle stood back in the shadows as Theodore climbed to the first floor window, slid through into the bedroom and soon threw the Captain’s boots and uniform down to the ground.

Joelle gathered them up and waited until Theodore joined her and they both returned to the farm house.

So, the first part of the plan had gone without incident, now came the hard part: breaking the Allied pilots out of the barn.

Straight away it was agreed that Theodore would not attempt to speak German. That would give the game away immediately.

He would simply walk up to the guard at the barn door, indicate with hand gestures for the soldier to open the door, and stride straight in.

If necessary, he was prepared to shoot as many German guards as he had to in order to free his fellow pilots.

At eight o’clock the next evening, Theodore was dressed in the Captain’s uniform and looking every bit the part of a German officer….blond hair, blue eyes and a strut rather than a walk.

He strode up to the sentry at the door, saluted sharply and pointed his swagger stick at the door and waved it from side to side.

Momentarily confused, the sentry stared at him unsure what he should do.

Theodore yelled, “Schnell! Schnell!” And the guard rushed to the door and threw it open.

Theodore walked briskly inside shutting the door after him.

The six pilots stood staring at this hated German officer until he spoke, “Good evening gentlemen. I am here to free you.”

“Cor blimey.” Said one. “You’re British.”

“Not exactly. I’m Australian, but I’m sure you won’t hold that against me.”

“Not at all. You’re as welcome as a cold beer on a hot day.” Remarked another.

‘”Very well then gentlemen. My plan is simply to walk out of here with you lot and then you’re on your own. Any questions?”

“None at all.” Said one pilot.

“Good. Ready then?”

All together they replied, “Ready.”

Theodore pulled his Luger out of its holster and stood behind the men with the gun pointed at their backs.

They walked to the door in a group, threw it open and stepped out into the night.

By then all the guards were gathered around the front of the door wondering what was going on.

Theodore looked straight ahead and kept walking.

The corporal in charge of the group stepped forward and said in a loud voice, “Hauptmann, wohin bringen Sie diese Gefangenen?” (“Captain, where are you taking these prisoners.”)

Using the little bit of German he knew, Theodore said, “Weiter so Soldat.” (“Carry on soldier.”)

The corporal’s concerns now confirmed, he drew his pistol and yelled, “Halt!”

Theodore knew what that meant and spun around and fired at the corporal.

The bullet hit him in the chest and immediately he fell to the ground.

The other guards, momentarily taken by surprised and without direction from their corporal, hesitated long enough for Theodore to get three more shots away.

Each bullet hit its mark bringing down three more soldiers.

Now there was only one left.

Seeing that he was alone, he dropped his rifle, spun around and ran off into the night.

The Allied pilots formed a circle around Theodore rejoicing, they picked him up and carried him on their shoulders into the safety of the forest.

The pilots then parted with Theodore and made their way back to the Allied lines.

Theodore returned to the farm house and told the family what had happened.

Their advice to him was to leave immediately and make haste towards friendly troops.

But before he left, Theodore had a talk to Joelle.

“I think I love you Joelle.” (In war time romance blossoms very quickly.)

“You’re crazy Theodore. But I think I love you too.” She replied.

“Tell me that you’ll wait for me. When the war is over I will come back for you. I promise.”

“Yes my love. Of course I will wait for you. Please don’t get yourself killed in the meantime.”

“Not now that I know you will be here waiting for me I won’t.”

“Hurry. Go now and be careful my love.” Said Joelle.

“One kiss before I go.” Said Theodore.

She reached up and kissed him long and hard, then he left her and headed to the west and friendly faces.

Well, Theodore then told me that, despite nearly getting caught, he managed to get back through to the Allied lines.

He was ferried out of France and across the Channel in an English fishing boat.

Now came the best part of the whole story: the news of Theodore’s heroism was spread far and wide by the six British pilots whom he had saved and made it back to England.

Within days the news of his astounding bravery had made it all the way to the Commander of the Royal Air Force, Air Chief Marshall Lord Dowding.

Not wanting to let such am uplifting story go to waste, the commander sent for Theodore.

When Theo arrived at the Commander’s headquarters he was met by a barrage of press photographers and Lord Dowding himself.

After a short speech and photo opportunities with the Commander and Theodore shaking hands, the couple retired to Dowding’s office.

There Dowding informed Theodore that he had recommended that he be awarded the Victoria Cross for outstanding bravery.

Theodore was stunned and thought that it was too great an honour.

“Nonsense.” Said Dowding. “What you did is exactly the type of thing the Victoria Cross should be awarded for.

Your quick thinking and courage saved six of our Spitfire pilot’s lives allowing them to get back in the air and fight the dirty Huns.”

So, according to Theo, the Victoria Cross was presented to him two weeks later by King George the Sixth at Windsor Castle with the news media in attendance.

He said that photographs of the event appeared in the newspapers right across the country the next day.

When all the hoopla had died down Theodore went back to his squadron and resumed flying missions over France.

The war in Europe came to an end on the second of September 1945 and Theodore, along with the rest of his squadron were demobbed and sent home.

But Theodore didn’t go home.

Instead he jumped on a ferry at Dover and sailed to Calais.

From there he caught a train to Amiens then a bus to Breilly.

He walked the last few miles to the Puissant family farm, whistling as he went.

He knocked on the old wooden door and who should open it but Joelle.

She let out a shriek of joy and threw herself into Theodore’s arms.

He swung her around happily until they were both giddy and they fell down in the grass.

A week later they were married in the small church in Breilly.

Theodore’s parents, Lincoln and Jean Anderson caught the British European Airways flight from London to Paris and then the train on to Amiens where they were met by Joelle’s father.

They both fell in love with Joelle at first meeting. She was petite, pretty and very clever.

But best of all, she clearly loved their son very much.

Joelle’s mother cried tears of joy at the wedding, then tears of sadness when her only daughter left her home for good to travel to the other side of the world with her husband.

Surprisingly, Joelle loved the life on the land and proved to be a great help around the homestead as well as helping with the cattle mustering.

Growing up on a farm had taught her how to ride a horse as well as a dozen other skills useful on the property.

Before long a son was born to Theo and Joelle.

They named him Leo.

When Leo was four years old, another son was born.

This one they named, Jacob.

Finally, a little girl came along who they named, Sarah.

I assumed that this part of Theodore’s story was factual.

There would be no sense in Theodore making up a story about a wife and children, although I was quite sure Theodore and *“Joelle”* had probably not met in France but at some outback country race meeting.

By this time the story was coming to an end and so was our journey.

So, half an hour before the train pulled into Roma Street Station in the heart of Brisbane, I decided to jerk the rope on dear old Theodore.

So, I casually said, “You know Theodore, I know you have been lying to me for the past day and a half.

I haven’t believed a word you have said since we left Townsville.”

“Yes Rupert. I am aware of that. Replied Theodore quietly.

But it doesn’t matter. Most people don’t believe my stories. Why would they? An old man on a train recounting some wild stories?

I don’t blame you or the others.

And for me, it has been interesting talking to you whether you believe me or not.”

He then went on: “you know Rupert, old men are like old cattle dogs, when they can no longer chase the herd, they stand in the back of the Toyota and bark.

Well, that’s pretty much all I do these days, sit and talk about when I was young.

So yes, of course I understand if you don’t believe me. But it’s of no consequence to me either way.

I know what I have done and I am actually quite proud of my achievements.”

When he had finished, for some reason I felt quite taken aback by his admission that he had known all along that I thought he was lying.

And all the while I thought that it had been my secret and the climax of the whole journey, for me at least, would be my announcing that all along I had known that he was lying.

So now the wind was knocked out of my sails and I was left wondering why anyone would continue on with such a ludicrous story when all the time they knew that they weren’t being believed.

For several minutes we both sat in silence while the Sunlander steadily wound its way into its final destination.

Then Theodore said, “You know Rupert, this trip to Brisbane means a lot to me.”

“How’s that Theodore?”

“Well, my grandson, Cooper, asked especially if I would bring my medals down with me so he can have a look at them.

You know he is only twelve, but he is a mighty bright boy.”

“But won’t you disappoint Cooper when he finds out that you don’t have any medals?” I asked.

“No. Not at all.” Said Theo.

“And why not?”

“Because I have them right here.”

“What!?”

“Yes, there here in my suit case. Would you like to see them?”

Now I was stunned. This couldn’t be real. Surely, he was playing another joke on me.

“Sure Theo. I’d love to see your Victoria Cross.” I said with a grin.

Without hesitation, Theo reached inside his suit case and brought out a rectangular box covered in blue velvet with gold clasps.

He held the case in front of me and opened it.

There, shining in the sunlight, was a Victoria Cross bordered on one side by, what I recognized as the Croix de Guerre, the highest medal awarded in France.

A number of other service medals surrounded the two famous decorations.

On the inside lid of the case was glued a photograph of the young Mister Browning being presented with the Victoria Cross by His Majesty, King George the Sixth in the great hall at Windsor Castle.



I just stood there, mouth agape, staring at those hard-won medals astounded that the story I was sure was all lies had actually been the truth the whole time.

Suddenly, my astonishment turned to shame and then to humility.

I was struck dumb.

What do you say to a man like Theodore? Someone clearly decent, honest and brave.

A man anyone could look up to with respect and a sense of honour, a man one could say about with pride:

“I knew Theodore Browning.”

Well, all I could muster was, “I’m so sorry Theodore for doubting you. It was very churlish of me. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Rupert, my friend,” said Theodore quietly. “There is nothing to forgive.

Life is not a contest and the things that happen to us throughout our life are generally not by design.

It is often by chance that a man finds himself in the right place at the right time.

But then it is up to the individual to find the courage within himself to take up the challenge and see it through.

In France I was in the right place at the right time although at the outset I lamented my bad fortune at getting shot down, but by the end I wound up a hero and married to boot.”

The Sunlander jerked to a stop with a hiss of steam and a squeal of brakes.

Our journey was over and I for one, having originally regretted my decision to take the train, would now have gladly embark on the return journey to Cairns if I could share a cabin with Theodore.

But it was time to say farewell to Mister Browning, VC.

Before we got off the train, I asked Theodore if I could write to him when I got back to England.

“Certainly Rupert. I would look forward to a letter from you. But you will have to address it to my daughter’s house here, in Kelvin Grove.

She has asked me to stay with her until after Christmas.”

When I got home to Cambridge, I waited a couple of weeks before writing to Theodore.

Another two weeks went by before a letter arrived from Australia.

I was surprisingly excited to get news from Theodore, but when I opened the letter, I noticed that the signature at the bottom of the page was not Theodore’s at all.

It was signed Cooper Cousins, his grandson.

Now mildly concerned, I quickly read the one-page letter:

“Dear Mister Anderson,

I am sorry to inform you that my grandfather, Theodore Browning is no longer with us.

The day he arrived at our house he suffered a massive heart attack and died in his bed.

Naturally this was very upsetting for my mother and for me.

You know, I loved grandad very much.

He told me that if anything happened to him, I was to have his war medals.

Well, I now have his medals, but I would swap all the medals in the world for a little more time with Grandad.

Yours sincerely,

Cooper Cousins.”

Yes, Cooper is a special child. Mature before his years. And maybe some of his grandfather’s geans have been passed on to him.

I was shocked and saddened by Cooper’s news.

And yes, Theo was an old man but I saw his death as a loss to Australia and indeed to the world at large.

There are few humans I would say that about, but Theodore Browning was certainly one of them.

I’m sure there must be other men like Theodore Browning in the world today, but I suspect, not very many.

Those days of courage and selflessness have long gone and Theodore was one of the last to have possessed those precious qualities.

He was a true hero and I am sincerely grateful to have had the chance to spend two whole days in his presence in a railway cabin……..

Travelling south.