A NURSE ON THE EDGE OF THE DESERT

A NURSE ON THE EDGE OF THE DESERT

From Birdsville to Kandahar:
the art of extreme nursing

ANDREW CAMERON
with John McCrystal

MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

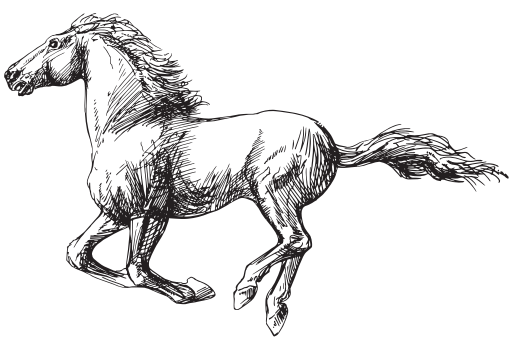
Author's note

I, the author, confirm that the views and opinions expressed in this publication are entirely my own and do not in any way constitute the official view or position of the ICRC, and that every effort has been made to comply with my obligation of discretion with regard to activities undertaken during my missions with the ICRC. I have met so many people during the course of my work with the ICRC, some of whom I refer to in this book. I have not used surnames or photographs that could identify them in order to protect their privacy.

CONTENTS

Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty. I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well . . . Life is not easy, and least of all is it easy for either the man or the nation that aspires to great deeds. It is always better to be an original than an imitation.
— Theodore Roosevelt

PROLOGUE



There's a truck parked at a rakish angle outside the pub, a capable-looking four-wheel drive with a tall flag and a snorkel and liberally stained with red dust. A dog lies panting in its shade. The dog stands, walks irresolutely into the sun, stops, pants hard, then returns to flop down in the shade again. Beyond it, a small roly-poly — the Australian equivalent of a tumbleweed — is stopped in the carriage-way, awaiting a breeze and a sense of purpose.

Rush hour in Birdsville.

I am walking west along the main drag towards the pub. It's hot, but not desperately so. The flies are about, but not in the numbers they will be later in summer. The wind has spared us today.

It feels like a calm before a storm. A couple of trucks have arrived and are parked in the lot across the road from the pub. The driver of one, the saddlery guy, is setting up his tent. The refrigerated container outside the general store is full of bags of ice, and one or two people are in the visitor centre, the advance guard of the invasion of 'grey nomads' we're expecting in the next few days. Everywhere you look, preparations are underway for their arrival.

I'm on my way to pay a visit to Jenna Brooks, the organiser of the annual Birdsville Races. Word has it the weather will intervene this year. The forecast is for a very active weather system to cross central Australia precisely when the races are on. This, needless to say, would be a bit of a blow for the town, which relies heavily upon the race crowd to set everyone up for the rest of the year. There has already been rain about. It has affected the Birdsville Track, the rough track — iconic among Aussie adventure motorists because of its roughness — between Birdsville and Adelaide, over 1100 kilometres distant. Too much more rain, and the track will close.

And despite the fact that the sky is blue and cloudless as far as the eye can see, the Diamantina River is perceptibly rising.

TOP Adelaide Street, Birdsville, outside the heritage-listed Birdsville Hotel. Built in 1884, it is Australia's most iconic outback pub, the last watering hole for hundreds of kilometres. In the tourist season, April to October, I am often called by the publican to see overnight guests who have 'taken a bit of a turn', which could mean anything from a stroke to a bad case of sunburn.

BOTTOM There are four of these signs in Birdsville, one on each of the four roads into town, from the north, south, east and west. In the height of summer, the population is more like a mere 45, as many of the 'permanent' residents leave for cooler climates for two or three months. The 7000 (can be up to 10,000) refers to the influx of tourists for the Birdsville Races (the Melbourne Cup of the outback).

It's one of the things about Australia that takes some getting used to: weather systems affecting countryside so far away that it might as well be overseas on the New Zealand scale of things. The Diamantina Shire, in which Birdsville is located, is part of the so-called 'channel country', which basically drains north-west Australia into the Great Australian Bight. You can be in the middle of a mini-drought in the Diamantina — no rain for weeks — and yet roads will be closing all around you due to flooding.

Jenna knows the score well enough not to be fretting too much about the weather. It looks as though we'll dodge the worst of the rain, and if we don't . . . well, what can you do? I admire the colour of this year's shirts for the volunteers, a rich forest green, and Jenna gives me a handful of race badges to give to my visitors. The badges serve as an entry pass to the racecourse 4 kilometres outside town to the east, and they're always a sought-after souvenir.

I walk back towards the clinic, curling my lip slightly at the traffic islands and the tidy footpaths. Both are an innovation. The concrete glares white in the hard sun and the islands are covered in lawn grass, a ridiculously bright green that has no place in the local palette. I was opposed to their construction, but the 'powers' felt that they would make the street look tidier. It does look tidier — for the time being, and with lots of input from sprinklers — but whether that's an improvement is a matter of opinion.

A road train rumbles in with a few hundred Portaloos aboard. A cloud of fine red dust pursues it into town.

Once I reach the clinic — I've been walking for all of three and a half minutes — the whole of Birdsville lies behind me. The tallest structures are the radio masts. Next, the water towers. The rest of the town is all one storey. To the east, the road extends through typical channel-country landscape: grey-brown earth studded with low-growing, parched eucalyptus.

It all shimmers in the heat. There are already a few campers established along the roadside, and clouds of dust in the distance herald the arrival of more. Some of the regulars turn up a month or more before the main event to settle in at their favourite camping places (their 'pozzies') beside the river, or wherever they think they'll find the most shade and not be slap-bang up against other campers. I have come to know some of them by name over the years.

My house is next door to the clinic. It's new-ish, built from the sandstone-coloured breeze blocks favoured in modern, utilitarian outback architecture. It is somewhat shaded by a few scraggy eucalypts, and in the red earth around it — no one apart from the traffic islands has lawns — my vegetable garden battles on gamely.

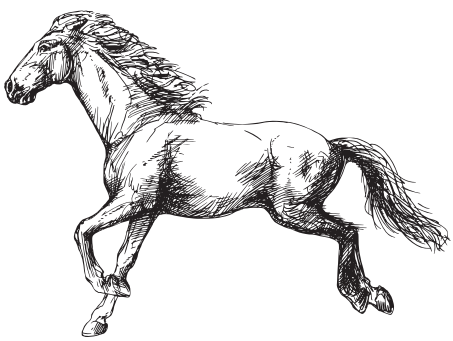
It's a funny kind of place to call home, but it is, for now. And compared with many of the places I have called home in my adult life, it hardly rates for strangeness.

I have lived under canvas and under roofs made of reeds or grass. When it has fallen to my lot to live in 'proper' houses, their walls are often made of mud, the same colour as the landscape from which they've been sculpted. The views from my windows have ranged from vistas of the outback and swathes of desert to high mountains — when there has been a view at all. Not uncommonly in recent years, my windows have been blocked by sandbags or by fortified fences and walls. Home has been among the disadvantaged, the diseased, the derelict, the destitute and those devastated by war. I have laid my head on a pillow or whatever passed for a pillow with my thoughts filled with the suffering I have seen that day, with the faces of those I have soothed or helped to save, or (just as often) those I could not help.

Birdsville, with its huge desert-quiet and its immense sky, is about as comfortable as I've had it in the past 25 years.

It will do for now.

01
4 CHURCH ROAD



I walk, as I walk every evening when I am able, east out of town. A concrete footpath — another new civic amenity — runs most of the way. A steady stream of vehicles is arriving, paintwork blurred by dust, crescents smeared on their windscreens by their wipers. Word has it the Birdsville Track has closed: there will be a lot of disappointed racegoers in South Australia.

As I cross the bridge over the Diamantina, I see that the water level has risen. The sky above us is still blue, but the weather forecast earlier in the day showed a large aquamarine blob spreading over the map of Australia from the west, reaching to the north and then slumping down through the centre.

People are camped everywhere. You have to admire some of the set-ups: people have brought everything, *and* the kitchen sink. Solar panels gleam in the sunshine, generators hum, and the blue flicker of televisions is visible in many of the RVs and even some of the tents.

Other walkers nod as they pass. Most wear t-shirts, shorts and thongs and the obligatory Akubra hat. Many carry switches of leaves torn from roadside trees to flick away the flies.

Just beyond the sign pointing to the Burke and Wills tree — one of several coolibahs in the Diamantina Shire that bear messages carved in blazes in their bark, indicating to those fabled, ill-fated explorers that supplies were buried beneath — I reach the little cairn I have placed at the roadside to indicate the 2.5-kilometre mark. This is where I turn and head back towards the clinic.

The sun is setting beyond Birdsville. Red sky at night, shepherds' delight — but we know better.

I was born in Whangarei in 1956, the fifth of the six children to whom my mother Margaret gave birth in just five years. My oldest brother, Nicholas Evan, was born in 1953 in Kerikeri. John David came along on Saint Patrick's Day in 1954, in Okaihau. Mum then had twins, Paul Kenneth and Jocelyn Adrienne in 1955, in Kerikeri, and 18 months after me, Fiona Rosemary was born in Kaikohe in 1959.

With six kids under five, my mother naturally decided that she needed some support, and when we were all still pre-schoolers, she prevailed upon Sidney, my Dad, to move us south to Hawke's Bay to be near Mum's elderly mother. Mum had enough money left to her from her father's estate to buy a rambling 100-year-old wooden house at 4 Church Road, Taradale. I seem to recall her telling me the house cost £3,000 (around $150,000 in today's money). It was there that I grew up.

The property had many out-buildings, including a woodshed, dairy (with a still-functional milk separator), a cow shed under a big walnut tree, a tool shed, a wash-house and a garage. The toilet and bathroom facilities were far from ideal. We had just one toilet between eight of us, and that was in a tiny room where the only indoor washbasin and bath were also situated. There was no shower. We each had a bath every few days, with three or four sharing the same bath water, one after another. There was only enough hot water for two bathsful, and as youngest boy (I think that was the reason), I was always last in line. Some of my earliest and not necessarily fondest memories are of sitting in the murky, warm water with Dad brushing his teeth a few inches away on one side and a big brother (or worse, sister) letting loose a bowel motion a foot away on the other.

We also had a large garden, where my father grew all kinds of fruits and vegetables. Most households in the street had a vegetable garden in those days, with a compost bin — the norm then, but regrettably a rarity now. We had trees bearing peaches, apricots, grapefruits, lemons and oranges, and a walnut tree. Towards the end of summer, Mum would