

AN OUTBACK DASH: MY GRANDFATHER'S DIARY

(A synopsis of an illustrated talk presented to the Kimberley Society on 7 July 2010 by Peter Holland, the well-known performer, lecturer and former ABC broadcaster)

It was the Kalgoorlie gold-rush that brought my grandfather and grandmother to Western Australia from Sydney, in 1907.

John Joseph Holland, known as Joe, was, on both his mother's and his father's side, the grandson of convicts who'd arrived in Botany Bay in the early 1820s. He was the first member of the family to receive a university education, and he graduated as a doctor of medicine in 1906, when he was 30 years old. The same year, he married Alicia, a nurse, and a few weeks later, the pair set off for WA.

He'd been earning ten bob a week as a newly-qualified doctor in a Sydney hospital. On the goldfields, he was soon earning ten times that amount. In 1910, he moved south to the farming community of Katanning, where he set up in private practice, and in 1914, he was able to buy a practice in West Perth.

He rapidly established a good reputation and was made Honorary Gynaecologist at Perth (later Royal Perth) Hospital, a post he held for 24 years. Later, he also took on the duties of honorary outpatient surgeon and joined the board of the hospital.

It was at this time, that Doctor Holland, at forty years of age and practicing in West Perth, was called to the Telegraph Office, located in what we now know as The Old Treasury Building on the corner of St George's Terrace and Barrack Street, to receive a message transmitted by Morse code along a wire, two thousand, two hundred and eighty-three miles, from the town of Halls Creek, in the far north of the state.

In the Telegraph Office, at nine o'clock in the evening, on the last day of July, 1917, a plea for urgent medical assistance – a series of Morse code dots and dashes – from Halls Creek, in the East Kimberley.

Halls Creek was originally a gold-rush town, but by 1917, it consisted of just twenty people and a handful of buildings, one of which was a post-office, connected by telegraph wire to the outside world.

It also had a postmaster, by name, Frederick Tuckett.

He was known locally as "WBL", which stood for "whole bloody lot". He was postmaster, telegraph operator, magistrate; births, deaths and marriages registrar, commissioner for roads and protector of Aborigines.

Now, it just so happens that 9 years before, he'd been working in Kanowna, on the Goldfields near Kalgoorlie, and he'd gone along to some first aid classes delivered by a young doctor, newly arrived from Sydney, called Joe Holland.

As a result, he had a first-aid certificate and a first-aid kit.

Now, let me introduce the third and central party in this story: 29-year-old stockman, Jim Darcy. And make no mistake, Darcy proved himself to be made of the same tough and wiry stuff as the hero of Banjo Paterson's *Man From Snowy River*.

To tell his story, I can do no better than to quote an extract from an article written a few years ago by Troy Lennon, of the *Daily Telegraph*.

Jim Darcy was mustering a mob of horses on Lambo Station, on a bright, sunny day on July 29, 1917, when the mob suddenly bolted. Setting off after the leader, his own horse stuck its hoof in a hole, throwing the rider off. The horse rolled and Darcy found himself under it.

He was pinned for hours under the horse, slowly baking in the hot sun before his work-mates found him.

Once freed from under the animal, his ordeal was far from over. He would endure days of agony and one of the most unusual outback operations, that would make him and the postmaster of Halls Creek, Fred Tuckett, a part of bush legend.

As Darcy writhed in pain, his friends could tell that he had sustained some serious internal injuries. Darcy was also recovering from a bout of malaria. He was put into a horse-drawn buckboard – a basic wagon consisting of a board between two axles with no springs to cushion the ride. He was taken to nearby Ruby Plains Station, but clearly he needed more help than anyone there could give him.

His work mates then took him to the nearest settlement, Halls Creek, hoping to get some kind of medical assistance from Fred Tuckett. It took 12 hours of agony, with frequent stops along the way, to give Darcy some small respite.

Tuckett was able to administer morphine, to dull Darcy's terrible pain, but he knew that his patient urgently needed medical attention.

He sent messages to Wyndham and Derby, but the doctors in both places were out of town and beyond contact. In desperation, Tuckett sent a telegraph to his former first-aid instructor, Joe Holland, who he knew now had a practice in Perth.

After the symptoms were relayed, Holland diagnosed that Darcy's bladder had to be emptied at once – by this time the bladder had not been relieved for 63 hours, and Tuckett had requested, "*please advise particularly about relieving the bladder*".

So an exchange of messages ensued: "*If you don't operate he'll die,*" was the grim reply, in dots and dashes.

So, you can see we have a situation here where a Postmaster, trained only in First Aid about nine years before, and with no surgical tools, should perform an operation guided by a doctor 2,000 miles away, at the end of a telegraph wire, communicating through a Morse key operator at about twenty words per minute.

On Thursday, the 2nd of August, 1917, the day of the operation, it took nine telegrams between Holland and Tuckett to describe the surgical procedure required: a perineal incision an inch deep; and a careful outline of how and when to open the bladder.

Tuckett wired back that, "if it were absolutely necessary, he could do this operation".

He gave his patient morphia to ease the pain, and prepared a small penknife with gauze wrapped around the blade to prevent too deep an incision. In the cool of the early evening, he went to work, while my grandfather waited anxiously in the Perth Telegraph office. And at 8 o'clock, the Morse message sounded out.

The operation had been successful, but Darcy was in a very weak state. He needed professional care and attention. Tuckett, and Darcy's two elder brothers, urged Doctor Holland to come north, to Halls Creek, to save their brother.

The next ship scheduled to leave Fremantle for Derby was the ss *Moira*, a State Steamship, chartered to carry cattle, but not licensed to carry passengers.

Dr Holland was required to sign on as a cattleman and to sleep in the mess room for the eight days of the coastal journey north.

It sailed on the 9th of August.

As soon as he disembarked in Derby, Holland wired Tuckett for an update on Darcy's condition. It was now a full two weeks after the operation.

He was told that the wounds and cavity had been healing well, but malarial fever had occurred. Darcy was losing strength, was dry retching and was able to take only a little nourishment.

So, Holland set off in a tiny Model T Ford to travel 360 miles over rough country to Halls Creek, all too aware that his patient's health was declining, and time was running out.

At Fitzroy Crossing, Holland had again been able to contact Tuckett by Morse. Tuckett was concerned by the onset of Darcy's malaria but said... *'the patient says he will walk out to see you and doesn't mind the fever'*.

He was now 220 miles from Derby and travelling in an old Ford car, with no mudguards, held together with a considerable amount of green-hide and rope. Aborigines helped push them across river beds and up sandy banks. They frequently had to unload the vehicle, then push it through difficult patches and over ridges.

His companions were remarkable men: Jack Johnson, a bushman and Bernard Barclay, a driver/mechanic. His diary at this time records the extraordinary skills these men displayed as they battled through country more suited to the horse or camel. The big end bearings in the car repeatedly collapsed and had to be replaced, requiring taking the engine down and rebuilding it. This cost two days travelling time, and they started running short of food. They were forced to detour to Fossil Downs station for supplies before continuing.

Before settling down to rest at Fossil Downs, Doctor Holland gathered together a small group of men and delivered some much-needed instruction in First Aid.

He was ever aware of the total lack of any medical assistance in these remote areas, and of people with serious physical conditions struggling on as best

they could. So, as he progressed towards Halls Creek, he aided and advised those who presented to him with ailments.

The going became increasingly rough and difficult. They had punctures, radiator leaks and more big end problems. On occasions, the car was at such an angle that petrol would not run into the carburettor.

They ran desperately short of fuel, and at one point my grandfather used the rubber tubing from his stethoscope to siphon the last gallon of petrol from a can which got them the five miles to where a cache of fuel had been left for them.

The last leg in the dash to save the life of James Darcy was painfully difficult, but they pushed on with all speed, driving at anything up to 30 miles per hour through the bush, and even – most dangerously – driving in the dark.

The Ford engine finally collapsed completely at 10 o'clock at night, when they were only 26 miles from their destination. They walked for two hours to a nearby station where Aboriginal stockmen went out and caught horses for them in the dark. It was one o'clock in the morning when they set off again with two of them in a sulky and one riding ahead, to forge a way through country my grandfather described as "frightfully rough and hilly".

They rode all night and arrived at Halls Creek at daybreak, having travelled 120 miles in 24 hours. My grandfather went immediately to Tuckett's house to hear the heartbreaking news that Darcy had died at 9:30 AM the previous day.

From boarding the cattle ship, 'Moirra', at Fremantle, to arriving at Halls Creek by horse and buggy, Joe Holland had made a mercy dash lasting two weeks and covering some three thousand seven hundred kilometres.

The details of the journey were recorded by my grandfather in his diary, which sits in the Battye Library.

Of course, it would have been a sweeter story if Darcy's life had been saved, but the whole incident illustrated so vividly: against the vast distances and formidable country of inland Australia, there just had to be a way, or ways, of getting skilled medical assistance to people in remote regions, quickly!

The tragedy elbowed even war news from many Australian newspapers and more than any other single event attracted nation-wide attention to the urgent need for doctors, hospitals and nurses in outback Australia.

Dr Joe Holland was one of the foundation members of the West Australian branch of the Aerial Medical Service, as it was first known, in the 1930s.

And as for that 29-year-old stockman? Well, the reverend John Flynn used Jimmy's story powerfully to illustrate the need for medical care in the outback, and to propagate the idea that was to become the Royal Flying Doctor Service. And the name of Jimmy Darcy has become a legend across the Australian outback.

Peter Holland, with acknowledgements to: Ron Sims, Loreley Morling, Troy Lennon.