

Image: boldmethod.com



***“Through the blood, through the mud, to the green fields far beyond!”***

I was just twenty and not long into my first real job, when this tall, gangly, dark-suited specimen, with slicked back hair and buck teeth, stuck his head around the office door, to announce that I was to work with him in South Australia. The guy was known, amongst our band of young interns, to be ferocious if pushed. It was the first time he had spoken to me on a one-to-one basis and I felt suitably intimidated.

*“Why me?”* I thought to myself. *“There are six other trainees to choose from. I have a girlfriend here in Melbourne. Why pick me to go to that God-forsaken place?”* But he looked and sounded adamant (in a ferocious sort of manner) ... and he was the boss. It was a no-win position, leaving me in danger of losing my job if I refused.

A few weeks later I watched through somewhat blurry eyes as the same guy - his full, spindly, six foot three inches – stood tall on the front bar of a small pub, in the middle of a parched outback, and raised a toast to all and sundry. Bending backwards with one

hand held high and a small glass of multi-coloured liquid in the other, he shouted out for all to hear: "*Through the blood, through the mud, to the green fields far beyond!*"

He had to shout to be heard over the clamoring din of the locals, who had stayed there till well beyond closing time, in honour of his presence. He was indeed a revered subject, admired by the *cocky* (bush farmer) clan who knew him well, stemming from the time he had worked as a farm management advisor, based in the area. Now, on this day when he had chanced to return, this raucous bunch of once-rich landowners – nowadays more and more on hard times because of the drought - treated him like a disciple of God, or (at least) a Knight of the Realm. That was the theory; but in truth it could also have been that his local entourage lingered on, to get one last, *free* drink.

Following the ritual, spoken, or shouted as in this case, *Sir Tom* - or perhaps *Tom the Baptist* - downed his *traffic light* with a high-handed flourish and promptly called for another round! "*Set them up again Sid, you old bastard,*" he called out to the white-haired barman standing beneath him. "*And the same goes for all this bloody ragtag bunch*" he continued, waving his arms in a wide sweep around the bar, to indicate the gathered throng standing about him, some red-faced, some in floppy hats, but all gazing in unison at the spectacle that was unfolding in their midst. "*It's not every day I get back to this most amazing place on God's Earth!*" This raised a cheer that bounced off the front bar's olive green, tiled walls and engulfed the man on the bar in a cloud of admiration. He turned and made an elegant arm-across-the-chest bow to show his gratitude, all but falling off the bar in the process.

Sid and Tom were old friends from days past and had been drinking together all evening, thus Sid was every bit as affected by the booze as the man standing above him. He looked up and laughed, then started to delve for suitable glasses, laying them out in a string on the bar. Sid was maybe a shade past tipsy, but he still knew a good night's earnings when he saw one, especially coming at that time, when the ever-encroaching *dry* was affecting him, almost as much as his long suffering clientele.

I was becoming accustomed to basking in the tall man's fame: whether at work or at play. This was Tom, my boss. And this was my introduction to a long, and on occasions fraught relationship, whereby years later, the master-servant association evolved into something I could never have imagined at the start: a situation where we would end up working in partnership. He was about twenty-five years my senior with tons of hands-on experience, which, over time, I grew to admire and absorb.

But that pathway to something which resembled a level playing field was not without its challenges. On the morning after the 'traffic light' routine I was a bit late for breakfast. I found him in the pub's floral-carpeted dining room, looking dapper in a mustard-coloured shirt with russet tie, his dark hair as usual, plastered back with *Brylcreem*, or something similar. As I approached, he looked up from his coffee and newspaper, holding my gaze with a penetrating stare and taking a long drag on his cigarette, before stubbing it out in the metal ashtray. I began to sense all was not good.

*"What time do you call this? He said, rapping three or four times on his wristwatch.*

*"When I said breakfast at seven, I meant breakfast at seven! You're almost half an hour late and we have appointments to meet!"* A few others at nearby tables were turning to admire the unfolding scene of humiliation.

*"Sorry Tom, I slept in a bit ... after last night I guess,"* was the only somewhat sheepish response I could muster. I was decidedly hungover and facing a full-blown inquisition at that stage of the day was something I was not either prepared for, or capable of.

*"Well my boy, if you're going to stay with me, you will learn to play hard; but you will also learn to work hard."* He put all the emphasis on the word 'also', then added *"If you're not up to it, then you're out!" Got it!?"*

With that he folded his paper, stood up, grabbed his cigarettes, and then without looking back headed for the door, stopping just before disappearing, to graciously thank the young, rather attractive waitress, for the wonderful breakfast. She was impressed.

I was never late for breakfast again; and I will remember his maxim for as long as I live.

So once we had sorted out – or perhaps I should say, *he* had sorted out - these niggling rudiments of our affiliation, things moved onto a more secure footing and the sometimes rather incredible experiences we had together began to mount up, to be transposed in my memory and now recalled back into existence. These recollections relate to a remarkable man with a unique zest that was all about living life to its fullest.

*Sir Tom* was an ex-fighter pilot from World War II, reduced in his forties and fifties to flying single-engine aircraft around the sometimes-remote hinterland and grassy field strips of Australia. But at times his old *Battle of Britain* days seemed to kick in, as we flew here, there, and everywhere, me looking on from the co-pilot's chair, wondering at times, what on Earth (and in the sky), might happen next.

On one occasion we were up, up and away, flying across a clear blue, early morning sky, in our hired-for-the-week, single-engine, Piper Cherokee, towards the far West of South Australia. Tom had suffered another late night, though he was always very aware of the rules and adamant about not drinking for the regulatory eight hours prior to flying. So once we had climbed out of Adelaide through a few wispy clouds and reached our cruise height in a clear blue sky over Spencer's Gulf, he leaned back in the pilot's seat of our four-seater aircraft, indicating he wanted to take a nap.

*"You take over."* He said casually, as if it was part of my routine working week. *"If anything happens, let me know."* Then motioned as if to begin his siesta. On that first instance – many others would follow - I gripped hard onto the co-pilot's wheel in front of me and looked out into the wide azure ahead, inwardly panic stricken! What if another plane comes into view? What if I can't keep us level? What if? What if? But looking back to that first time, I soon got over the jitters, and before long the relatively meagre abilities required to keep a plane on the straight and level became almost second nature. Apart from the occasional bump from a bit of air turbulence there was really nothing at all to

worry about ... so no reason to wake my slumbering, at times snoring, and mildly hungover boss.

Later, during that same excursion, we flew out of Port Lincoln, the main town, on another early morning ride, this time following a flight plan which tracked along the 150-mile western coast of South Australia's Eyre Peninsula. So there we were: my boss and I - partners in crime - scooting over the water, at a height dangerously close to the waves and just about level with the adjacent cliff top.

*"I love shark spotting in the early morning,"* he yelled, above the engine's roar, almost mimicking *Robert Duval* from *Apocalypse Now* with his infamous line: *"I love the smell of Napalm in the morning"*. This was followed by a brief chorus of *'Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,'* (one of his favourite little ditties), as we descended even closer to the breaking waves. This brief lapse into song proved two things: first that he couldn't sing in tune, and second, that he despised anything to do with religion!

This was Tom at his best: carefree and up for anything, but underneath all that, his mind still firmly focused on the job he was doing ... and the job ahead. However, as much as I appreciated our rather unusual commuting-to-work, airborne adventure, at the same time as Tom was singing the delights of *The Great White Shark* (which lay in wait below), another sunny morning and the devine, I was busy trying to keep the fatty eggs and bacon dish I had downed a little while before, inside my stomach. As it turned out we spotted quite a few sharks, but my breakfast did not remain in my gut.

*"You can clean that mess up, before we refuel and head for Adelaide!"* He barked, before marching off towards the airstrip office, which only served to remind me of the time he stormed away from the breakfast table, a few months before. With Tom, it was often an uphill learning curve, but it was nearly always inspirational, and I was beginning to catch on to handling the vagaries of my self-appointed mentor.

Though flying on the job was in many ways stimulating, for a long time I never really enjoyed it. This began in my early teens, when after dreaming for years of becoming a pilot, I went for a first flight, at night and above Wales in a regulation Royal Air Force transport plane, from which I emerged drenched in vomit and never wanting to go anywhere near one of those winged monsters, ever again in my life! This feeling slowly abated, but I was from the beginning, plagued by motion sickness and as I discovered in Australia, flying in single-engine aircraft probably brought it to the fore more than any other form of travel. So, on the next occasion (the one after the episode of throwing up whilst shark-spotting!) we were high in the sky when I proudly announced I had taken some new travel pill, to keep me safe and spew-less!

*“Ahaa! OK, we’ll see about that my boy,”* was the immediate response, as he looked sideways at me with a bit of an evil grin on his face.

*“Oh, my God”* I thought. *“Why on Earth did I open my mouth to tell him?”*

With that said, he opened the throttle and pulled back on the column, putting the plane into a maneuver known in the trade as a *stall turn*. This is when the plane is made to climb so steeply that the engine fails and the aircraft falls out of the sky, twirling around and around like a paraglider in free fall. The whole thing is reasonably safe (in the hands of a competent pilot) but also decidedly stomach-churning. On this occasion I remember looking back at my sometimes-crazy mentor, as we fell out of the sky, like I was out for a Sunday stroll and with, I presume in retaliation, a rather self-satisfied grin on my face.

*“Jesus Christ!”* He blurted out blasphemously (as mentioned, he was far from being a religious soul) *“Maybe you’re right: your bloody pills actually do work! Let’s try it again for good measure, shall we?”* Followed by a tug back on the stick causing the plane to climb, once again, towards the heavens.

Another even more alarming airborne escapade, happened as we were attempting to land on a wild and windy hilltop, for tea and a chat with one of Tom’s favourite farmers.

This time we were flying a high-winged Cessna aircraft - a rather bulbous workhorse compared to the more stylish Piper, but none-the-less a safe plane, in the right hands. As usual we made a preparatory run, fast and low – *buzzing the strip* (as it was termed) at a height perhaps twenty feet above the grassy knoll - to clear the sheep and any other stray animals away from the landing run. The farmer in question was standing in the back of his mud-splattered *ute* (the Aussie term for *utility*, or *pick-up*), hair blowing in the gale and waving madly as if to indicate it was too dangerous to land.

*“Bugger that,”* Tom yelled above the roar of the engine, as he fought with the controls. *“I’ll get this bucket of bolts on the ground, if it bloody-well kills me!”*

And with that we zoomed up and around, ready to approach the now sheep-less strip once again. Tom, showing all the guile of his WW2 piloting days, was struggling with the stick and there was a loud and continuous beeping noise coming from the control panel. He was fixed resolutely on the task of landing, sweating profusely as he made to try and hit the strip at the right point. With the engine revving loudly and the plane tracking at an absurd angle to combat constant buffeting from the fierce side wind, we finally hit the ground and rolled to a standstill next to the farmer’s vehicle.

As we taxied up to the man still standing in the back of his *ute*, now with his hands on his head in a look of disbelief, Tom pulled back his side window and yelled out: *“Christ almighty, Bruce, you see what I’m prepared to do for one of your wife’s home-made scones!”* He turned to look at me with a big, satisfied smile, that stretched from ear to ear. I could sense then he knew intuitively that he had my full trust in him as a pilot.

*“Jesus, Tom,”* the suitably alarmed looking farmer responded, once we were out of the aircraft and on the ground. *“You must be fucking mad. You could have killed the both of you ... and messed the plane up too, which would have been even more serious! But anyway, the kettle’s on; come in for a cuppa ... and now you mention it, a scone too.”*

Apart from using the plane as a commuter vehicle, it also had a work role too. One rather challenging job that was done whilst airborne was infra-red photography. This involved low level flying, whilst circling above various experimental field plots which I had painstakingly laid out on the ground beforehand. The infra-red would identify which crop treatments gave better, or worse results.

For this job we removed the wide side door from the back of the Cessna (it had to be a Cessna, so that the high wing did not obstruct the downward view). Then I would strap myself into the back seat, ready to take repeated shots of the plots down below, as Tom piloted the plane in a steeply banked circle, perhaps 100 feet above the ground. It was, to say the least, an operation not without risk, firstly that the plane might stall at such a low height and fall out of the sky, but also that I might somehow come loose from the belt and plunge to my demise amongst the wheat plants I had sown, some months before. Later the aircraft used were modified, with a fixed camera pointing downwards through a hole in the floor, but for the first year or two it was trial and error of the new technique, with the plane, the pilot and myself as expendable commodities!

It wasn't always when airborne that Tom's eccentricities came to the fore. Sometime later, I was invited to his relatively palatial suburban house for a party. It turned out to be yet another memorable affair with family and friends, and a whole lot of things happening that I had never dreamt of, let alone encountered, in my life before. At one stage, early on in the evening, Tom was given a tomato sauce hair shampoo by two or three of the most beautiful guests - all being extremely attentive - while later in the night he stood on the back roof of his bungalow, cooling the late-night-stayers down with a high pressure hose and collectively berating them all for digging a five foot deep hole in the centre of his carefully manicured lawn, using a soil-sampling hole digger they had found in the back shed, which they now sat around in a circle quaffing beer and wine, (and anything else they could get their hands on). Into this hole went a whole cache of valuables, owned by numerous partygoers ... but more crucially at that moment in time, including a pair of specs and one or two other items, owned by Tom!



Tom was a man with extensive knowledge and vast experience in his chosen world of agriculture. Equipped with bucket loads of charisma to boot, he could charm the shoes and socks off most of the farmers we met (there were always a minority of course who took the opposite view: that Tom was a womanizing braggard, who *flew by the seat of his pants!*). He had mannerisms, that even when sober, made him appear slightly inebriated. Standing at the centre of an engrossed group, with sleeves rolled high and waving his long arms around like a hairless, but very toothy chimpanzee, he would extol the virtues of some farming technique, or recount various past experience, for the benefit of his enraptured audience.

*“Look Jim, just do it like this, and I promise you’ll have no regrets. I’ll bet one hundred to one that what I’m telling you to do this season will turn out to be a bloody sight better than what you did last year. But don’t take my word for it, ask Bill, right next to you.”*

I would look on from the back and sometimes think to myself: *“This is based on fact but embellished with pure bullshit! How on earth does he get away with it?”*

As one could guess, Tom was also a man for the ladies. Although perhaps no Brad Pitt look-alike, he possessed the inbuilt charms of a Hollywood star, which had the ladies – old and young - running after him, wherever he went. When I first met him, he was married with a young family (one of whom died in a tragic accident) but later he became divorced and for a few years enjoyed the obvious (but perhaps dubious) advantages that he was able to call on as a single man. Then to my great surprise Tom married a woman of his own age - very mature and matronly – soon after the wedding, jetting off with her to take up a UNDP advisory role, based in Jakarta, Indonesia.

After a five-year stint away from Australian shores they both came back and set up home in the house which – as described in brief above - became infamous for booze-driven and uproarious parties. Tom and I became colleagues once again, this time as partners in an agricultural management consultancy. Joan, his wife of five years,

decidedly stout and mature, with naturally grey, permed hair, became the bookkeeper, and as always (of course), Tom was the boss.

Many years after this, when I had moved to another country and well after they had retired, I returned to Australia and spent a few hours with Tom and his partner Joan, in their new suburban setting North of the City of Adelaide. It was something of a shock to see this lanky, effervescent, dark-haired being, whom I had once known, now well into his eighties, with extra weight, very little hair and encroaching Alzheimer's, apparently sometimes even unable to find his way home from the local shops. This was the man who, once-upon-a-time, could fly a plane with the confidence of a wartime ace and charm the socks of most men and women he met, whilst entralling the crowd in an outback pub. How things had changed.

I left their house in two minds: glad that I had taken time out to see Tom, for what I knew would be the last time, but sad that this was not the man I had known in an earlier life. There were flashes when he returned to the person I once knew: glimmers from the Tom of old, as he chastised me for being sick in his plane, or afraid to take over the joystick, or arriving hungover in the breakfast room. For short moments he returned to that young stringy man that had first craned his rubbery neck around the office door, asking me to join him at work in South Australia. I was disenchanted at the time, but now looking back, taking up the offer (perhaps more correctly, the order) and following this man was one of the best decisions I have made in my entire life. He became a great friend and a true mentor, teaching me more than anyone else I can remember. Thanks so much for that Tom, I will always be grateful.

*And for Christ's sake* (as you would often say to me, Tom), do rest in peace, wherever you are. You have gone through the blood, and through the mud, and now I am sure you have reached those green fields far beyond. You deserve that, at the very least.

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