



A NURSE ON THE EDGE OF THE DESERT

From Birdsville to Kandahar:
the art of extreme nursing



ANDREW CAMERON

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ANDREW CAMERON
with John McCrystal



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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.

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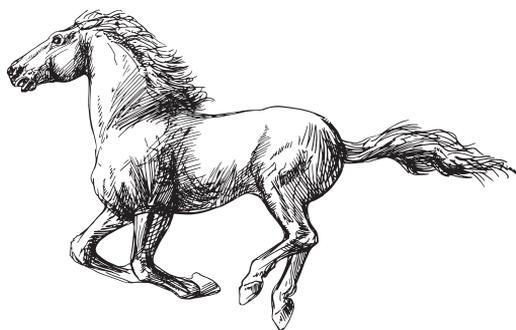
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Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty. I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well . . . Life 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 ‘puzzies’) 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.

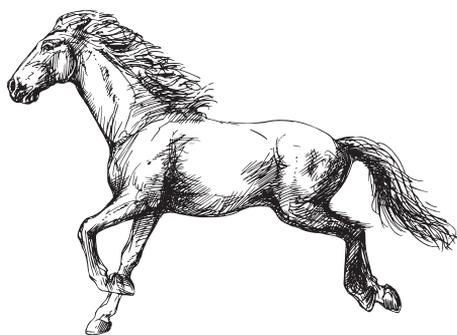
It’s a funny kind of place to call home, but it is, for now. And compared with many of the places I have called home in my adult life, it hardly rates for strangeness.

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

make countless bottles of preserved fruits and boil up huge saucepans of fruit and sugar to make jam. She peeled the fruit by immersing it in sinks of caustic soda. God knows what that did to our insides. Sometimes, as a family we would go on berry-picking expeditions. We'd come home sunburnt, riddled with prickles and nursing stomach-aches from overeating, but the blackberry and apple pies, which Mum made with thick, crusty butter pastry, were well worth it.

Every autumn a truckload of pre-cut pine would be dumped on our lawn. It was quick work for the six of us to cart it by barrow and stack it in place. By the time we had been at primary school for two or three years, we were adept at stacking firewood, and Mum used to volunteer our services to the old ladies in the neighbourhood when their firewood was delivered. We thought nothing of performing this service, and asked nothing in return.

Similarly, we were often loaned out to our next-door neighbours, the Youngs, a family of Chinese market gardeners. We could see their glasshouse, usually full of tomatoes and other plants, from the rear of our house. Their garden extended for quite some acres, maybe five or six, behind our house down to the creek; it is all built-over with expensive houses now. They were a large family, too: six girls and one boy (Allan), yet sometimes when frost threatened there simply weren't enough Youngs. On these occasions, Mr Wing Young would call around at dinner time and ask Mum if he could urgently borrow us to help put paper covers over each precious, newly emerged seedling.

As we grew older, we would sometimes earn some money from Mr Young, weeding his rows of lettuces and thinning his carrots along seemingly endless rows. We used to get a few pennies for each row.



My first memories of life in Taradale were of being dropped off at Taradale Primary School, which was next door to us on the other side from the Youngs. On her way to work, my mother would often

leave me at the school dental clinic to be minded by the dental nurse, who was a friend of hers. To this day, whenever I smell cloves, I'm transported back to that time, playing with pieces of cotton wool and dental floss on the highly polished blue linoleum floor of that clinic. My later memories of the school dental clinic, or 'murderhouse' as it was known among my generation of school children, are less pleasant. We didn't have toothpaste. Instead, we used a kind of salty, astringent pink powder that came in a small pottle, into which we dipped our toothbrushes. Who knows whether it was the powder that did the damage or the brushes, with bristles like wire, but our teeth and gums suffered. The dental nurse had a field day with her low-speed drill, boring into our teeth and filling them with black amalgam of mercury.

Next to starting school at five, the biggest change in my life came when I turned six and learned to ride a bike. Suddenly, I had more freedom to roam about. My brothers and I went for long rides, often up over the hill to Puketapu, where we'd jump off the high rocks into the Tutaekuri River for a swim — always a delight on hot summer days. When I think of the dangers we took jumping from high cliffs into not-so-clear, fast-running river water, it's a wonder no one injured themselves permanently.

With the extra freedom came added responsibility. A couple of times a month, Mum would send me up to the shops on my bike to pay the bills. As she handed me the wad of dockets, with Bank of New Zealand cheques pinned to each bill, she would say: 'Now, Andrew. This one you must take to the Borough Council and hand it over to the clerk, and make sure you get a receipt. This one, take to the baker and make sure you get a receipt. This one, take to the grocer . . . This one to the butcher . . .' If I had to collect something to bring home, I had to make sure it was correct otherwise I'd have to go back.

Once I collected a forequarter of lamb from the butcher, as instructed, and brought it home on my handlebars. Upon unwrapping it Mum frowned and said, 'Andrew, you can take this meat back to the butcher. Tell him, nicely, mind you, to cut all that fat off there . . . you see? And then tell him Mrs Cameron wants you to re-weigh it and adjust

the account.’ So that’s what I did, and so far as I knew then, there was nothing out of the ordinary about it.

I don’t recall getting pocket money from my parents the way most other children got from theirs. Instead we had to earn our own, one way or another. For this I sometimes used to grow beans and carrots and other vegetables and sell them to the neighbours. When I was six, and old enough to push a manual lawnmower, I started to mow the grass for several of the old widows and spinsters who lived in our street and nearby — I had five elderly clients at one time. One was a Miss Alexander who lived in a big house on the corner of Church Road and Puketapu Road.

Then there was Miss Wallace and Mrs Prince, who lived opposite us. I think they were alcoholics and they both had gravely voices from continual cigarette smoking. They had an unusual house and played cards a lot, usually bridge. I can still hear the deep, piratical voice of Miss Wallace asking me if I wanted a glass of lemonade and a piece of cake as I paused for a breather between cutting their front and back lawns. Once they gave me a slice of caraway seed cake and I later said to Mum that ‘it wasn’t a good cake today. In fact, I could hardly swallow it.’ When I’d saved enough shillings, I bought my own shiny new bicycle, blue with whitewall tyres. I spent as much time cleaning and oiling it as I did riding it.

As a family, we must have munched our way through huge amounts of food. At the end of each meal, there was never anything left on our plates, not even a lick of gravy or a crumb of bread. To this day, I’m horrified to see the amount of food people scrape from their dinner plates into the rubbish bin or needlessly throw away. If there was ever any mould or fungus on the food in our house at 4 Church Road (not that any of the food stayed around long enough to go mouldy), Mum would cut off the offending piece and we’d happily consume the rest. No one ever got ill from food poisoning.

Once a week, usually on a Friday night, we’d have fish and chips. Dad would go up the street in his yellow 1956 Austin van — sometimes one or more of us would go with him — and wait for the order to be cooked.



Me and my siblings around 1960, at 4 Church Road, Taradale. Seated from left: Andrew, Jocelyn, Fiona, Nicholas. Behind are John and Paul. We had it pretty good, really.

Friday was a busy night at Greer's fish and chip shop. Then home would come this enormous bundle of steaming, greasy, fragrant salted fish and fries wrapped in newspaper. We would sit around the big oak table in the dining room, waiting for any stragglers to arrive. Then, on the word 'go' (and not before), we would hoe into it. We all ate as fast as we could for fear of missing out.

Forty years later, I was at my sister Jocelyn's house for a meal, and just before I finished, Jocelyn's husband Owen and their daughter Georgina burst out laughing.

'It's a dead heat!' Owen declared. Jossie and I had wolfed down our food as usual. Unbeknown to either of us, the other two had put rival bets on who would finish first.



Mum ran the house along military lines. We had to stand by our beds by 7:30 in the morning for inspection, and she would note whether we had made our beds properly and whether our shoes (which we hardly ever wore) were clean. She had a points system in place. By the end of each week, whoever had accrued the most points got a small prize. Because I always wanted to win the prize, I drew lines with pieces of white chalk on the red felt 'carpet' of our room and told my three brothers that 'anyone who steps over this line will *get it*.' Of course, they were all bigger than I was, so my threats were meaningless to them.

Us kids used to fight like hell in the back of the Austin van, and Mum used to get so sick of it. One day, about 10 miles from home and at her wits' end, Mum slammed on the brakes and told us to get out and walk home. I don't remember the episode clearly because I was only about five years old, but the story goes that I sat down and cried, Paul and John started walking, then John, older and more enterprising than the rest of us, stuck out his thumb and before long had a lift from a passing motorist. John prevailed upon the driver to make haste and take a shortcut. When Mum pulled into our driveway, John was casually

walking up the verandah steps to the front door. If Mum was impressed, she didn't show it.

On another occasion, one of the bigger boys had come back from rugby training and wiped his dirty legs on a clean white towel in the little bathroom. Mum was furious about that. Of course, no one owned up to the misdemeanour, so Mum locked us all in the bathroom and gave us five minutes to decide 'who had done it'. Being the youngest boy and the most naive, the others told me to go out and ask her what the punishment would be for whoever owned up. So out I went.

'Mum,' I said, a quaver in my voice, 'if I tell you I did it, will I get a belting?'

You can imagine what happened after that.

Being the fifth child of six, I spent much of my time trying (in vain) to get a word in edgeways. Ever-perceptive, Mum once bought me a children's book called *Nobody Listens to Andrew*. I have it still: the book has a yellow hard cover, and it exhibits the personal touch in the form of crayon drawings all over it in my very own pre-school hand.



By the time I reached school age, my mother and father did not like each other so much. I slept in the front bedroom with my three brothers — Nick, John and Paul. Our father slept in his own room adjacent to ours. Mum slept in another room down the back of the house with Fiona. When she was about nine, my sister Jocelyn decided to clean up one of the dusty, derelict tool sheds next to the bike shed and wash-house and sleep there. She painted the walls with black enamel paint and made her own style of gothic furnishings. Maybe out there she was the happiest of any of us.

It wasn't until I was quite a lot older that it occurred to me it was odd that my parents never slept in the same room, let alone in the same bed. Naturally we never went into the bedrooms of our friends' parents, so I probably presumed that everyone else in the neighbourhood had

similar sleeping arrangements. Nor did I notice that my parents never gave each other a hug, cuddle or kind word (at least, not in front of their children). In fact, looking back, they seemed to avoid each other as much as was possible.

My father, Sidney Kenneth Cameron, was born in Calais, France, on 8 April 1926. He had two siblings: Renee Nancy Cameron, born in 1922 and John Robert Cameron, born in 1924 (still alive and kicking to this day). Their father, Finlay, was an electrical engineer and was a soldier in both world wars. During World War I, he was a lieutenant in the Royal Engineers and fought on the beaches of Gallipoli. He had been born at Stornoway on the Isles of Lewis in the Scottish Hebrides, the youngest son in a large family, mainly of boys. Actually, on his birth certificate it says that his family lived on Kenneth Street — perhaps that had something to do with my father's middle name, because we have a family tradition of giving people names that link them to where they were born. (One of my aunts on my mother's side apparently had 'Palmerston North' as a middle name, and one of my daughters has the name 'Porangahau' embedded in hers.) My father's grandfather, Donald Cameron, was the police superintendent for Lewis, and he was very popular on the island as he spoke Gaelic and identified closely with the crofters. According to a newspaper account of one of the incidents he resolved on the island, he was described as a 'blond giant'. I don't know what happened to those genes.

My grandfather Finlay was billeted with a French family in northern France during World War I and fell in love with their beautiful and gifted daughter, Adrienne Juliette Delhaye. The family were lace-makers and milliners. Adrienne's mother, Marie Josephine, ran a thriving business making hats. She employed nine women and used to go to Paris to see what was being worn, drew pictures and came back to Calais to have the designs made up. She bought several houses on the Quai du Rhin in Calais: she lived in one of these, and one of her daughters lived in another. Sadly, the houses were bombed and totally destroyed during World War II.

My father's family lived some of the time in Calais and some of the

time in London in the suburb of Cricklewood. I have no information about their family life, apart from the fact that Finlay was a keen gardener and was London's official beekeeper during his retirement. He would be called on to collect wild swarms from around the city. Even once they had shifted to London, they spoke French at home. Like her mother, Adrienne was very skilled at sewing. My father, Renee and John all went to the Lycée in London, a school for French children, of whom there were many: the families of French chefs, diplomats' children, and so on. Not long before Renee died, my sister Fiona met an old lady, Hélène, who had been at school with my father and Renee. Her father was a teacher at the school and she told Fiona that her father regarded my father as the most brilliant pupil he had ever taught.

During the Blitz, like tens of thousands of other children, my father, his brother and sister, teenagers at the time, were sent to the countryside to be billeted with a farming family. My father was about 25 as the war came to an end, and with things grim in England at that time, he emigrated to New Zealand. He never returned to England. Upon arrival in New Zealand, he landed in Auckland and quickly found a job as a farm labourer at Okaihau in Northland. God knows what it was like going from his sophisticated upbringing and cosmopolitan London to 1940s Okaihau. Culture shock would hardly begin to describe it. Somewhere, not long after he had settled into his new life on the land, Sidney met my mother.



My mother's name was Margaret Mary Williams. By the time she was born on 23 December 1931, her father, Arthur Lewis Williams, was already 66 and had been married twice before he met my grandmother, Mary Louisa, in 1929. Mary had been married twice before as well, to men who rejoiced in the surnames of Garbutt and Grindrod. Both had left her a widow, but not before they had given her children. So, what with both of her parents having married a couple of

times, my mother had a veritable horde of siblings and half-siblings around the place — no fewer than 18 (and possibly more). I met some of them when I was growing up. Nor was her mother finished. After my grandfather Arthur died in 1944, Mary (a widow for the third time) married yet again. I remember her last husband, Mr Geard, who was a wizened old man when I was a small boy.

Arthur Williams was a baker by trade and the son of an Australian goldminer. Mary was the daughter of a Welsh seamstress. My mother was born and grew up in Levin, a rural town 90 kilometres north of Wellington, and despite the profusion of her siblings, she was effectively an only child, as most of them were adults by then. My mother didn't say much about her childhood, apart from the fact that she was 13 stone (about 90 kilograms) by the time she was 13, probably a testament to the skill with which her father plied his trade from his bakery on Whareroa Road.

Mum was a nursing student at Hastings Memorial Hospital in Hawke's Bay when she met Dad, who was motorcycling through the North Island on a Royal Enfield, an ancient four-stroke contraption. Mum was hitchhiking (a common practice in those days). He gave her a ride and that, as they say, was that. Dad wore fine clothes, including a cravat and sometimes a beret, and wonderful hand-woven tweed jackets: with the clothes and the accent, he must have stood out from the more regular New Zealand men. Even Dad's taste in tobacco was a bit special: he favoured Pocket Edition, which he rolled in 'Double Deck' papers. I know this well, because from when I was about six years old onwards he often asked me to nick up to the Taradale shops on my bike to buy more for him. Sometimes I got away with keeping the threepence change. Everyone smoked: even Mum smoked a pipe for a while.

Birth control was a bit erratic in those days. Mum was about 20 when she became pregnant with my oldest brother Nicholas. A few months later, in 1952, my mother and father got married in Rotorua.

My mother used to keep a journal, and there are photos throughout. I like looking at these. She looks happy, even after she met Dad — for a while, at least.