

Biography

E.G. (Tom) Kruse MBE

28.08.1914 – 30.06.2011

Esmond Gerald (Tom) Kruse was born on August 28th 1914. He is the tenth of Ida and 'Harry' (Henry) Kruse's twelve children. His father was a blacksmith at Waterloo north of Adelaide.

Tom left school in 1927 and did various labouring jobs in the district including working in his father's blacksmith shop where he lost a finger as a result of an accident. After a few years he moved to Yunta in the pastoral northeast to work in a small garage owned by his older brother Snow.

Tom's truck driving career started in 1932 working for Yunta storekeeper and postmaster John Penna. Tom was eighteen years old. In 1934, pioneering outback transport operator and mail contractor Harry Ding's moved his operation from Olary to Yunta. He bought out Snow's garage and John Penna's business and offered Tom a job.

The expanding Ding enterprise won the tough and potentially lucrative Birdsville Track mail contract. On January 1st 1936, in searing 45-degree heat, Tom drove his first Marree to Birdsville mail run. Mail, fuel, supplies and the occasional passenger had to get through and Tom did battle with sand hills, dust storms, flies and floods, swollen rivers and creeks along the Birdsville Track every fortnight. Round trips between Marree and Birdsville normally took seven days but when the Cooper flooded across the track, it could take as long as six weeks.

Some other well-known Birdsville Track mailmen include Monty Scobie, Ken Crombie, Fred Teague, Tom Robinson and Max Bowden. In 1939 Tom helped transporting supplies for Dr. Cecil Madigan, the second European to cross the Simpson Desert by camel.

After his marriage to Valma Fuller in 1942, the newly weds settled at Marree and became more or less branch managers for Harry Ding at Marree and Lyndhurst.

In late 1947 Tom bought the Marree based part of the Ding operation. Harry had moved to Wilcannia in western NSW in 1944. On January 1st 1948, twelve years to the day he drove his first Marree to Birdsville mail run, Tom took over the Birdsville mail contract for 396 pounds a year. Tom held it for 15 years and sold it in 1963.

In early 1951 Tom stopped doing regular trips along the track. He had started an earthmoving and tank sinking business in the pastoral north. He worked in the north until the mid 1980s when he retired with Valma to their family home in Cumberland Park in Adelaide.

Through late 1951 and 1952, director with the Shell Film Unit John Heyer shot *The Back of Beyond*. Tom, his offsider William Henry Butler and the Leyland Badger were recalled to play themselves, delivering mail and supplies along the Birdsville Track. *The Back of Beyond* became an international award winning Australian classic. Tom Kruse and the Badger were immortalised.

In the 1955 New Year's Honours list, Tom was awarded an MBE for ... 'services to the community in the outback ... risking his life on many occasions'. Lady Slim, wife of the Governor-General, flew to Birdsville on Monday July 18th as part of an outback tour to present the MBE. Tom didn't make it to the investiture. He got stranded in the Cooper, cut off by floodwaters. Tom finally received his decoration from Sir William Slim at Government House in Adelaide in April 1956.

His best-recognised mail truck was a Leyland Badger was in the UK in 1936. It was sold by Crawford's (later CMV) to Harry Ding and then purchased from Harry in 1949. It finally broke down and was abandoned in 1957 on Pandie Pandie Station near Birdsville.

The Badger was rediscovered in the desert in 1986 during the *Jubilee Mail Run* re-enactment and fully restored at Northfield in Adelaide by Tom and a group of enthusiasts lead by Neil Weidenbach between 1996 and 1999.

The Mail Truck's Last Run re-enactment in October 1999 from Birdsville to Birdwood had Tom and the Badger deliver more than 7000 letters from all over the world and resulted in the documentary *Last Mail from Birdsville – the Story of Tom Kruse* produced by Corrugated Air Productions.

In 2000 Tom was inducted into the National Transport Hall of Fame in Alice Springs. In 2003 he was officially recognised as an Outback Legend by Australian Geographic and both he and the Badger were nominated South Australian icons by the National Trust.

The Back of Beyond Collection, celebrating the 50th Anniversary of *The Back of Beyond* was released at Marree on July 24th 2004. The project was supported by the CMV Foundation and the double DVD set of Tom's life is sold in support of the RFDS. The Badger is now permanently housed at the National Motor Museum at Birdwood in the Adelaide Hills.

Since 2008, five bronze busts of Tom have been unveiled by him and Governor-General Michael Jeffery, David Brook OAM, Robert Butler, Roger and Brenton Kruse and Ted Egan AO. The busts were produced by Robe artist Patricia Moseley and are located at Marree, Birdsville, Waterloo, the National Motor Museum at Birdwood and the National Road Transport Hall of Fame in Alice Springs.

E.G. (Tom) Kruse MBE passed away at the Fullarton Lutheran Home in Adelaide at 7.40 am on Thursday June 30th 2011. He was 96 years old. Mrs Valma Kruse (nee Fuller) passed away on Wednesday August 25th 2010. Valma Kruse was 91 years old.

Tom's funeral was held at the Morphetville Racecourse at 2.30 pm on Thursday July 7th. He was baptised in the Karlsruhe Lutheran Church just north of Waterloo in the mid north of South Australia and the graveyard attached to this church will be the last resting place of his ashes.

July 8th, 2011

Prepared by Ian Doyle 0417 819 189