

OBITUARY

E.G. (Tom) Kruse MBE

28.08.1914 – 30.06.2011

Esmond Gerald (Tom) Kruse was born on August 28th 1914 in a room of the house owned by his parents at Waterloo, north of Adelaide. He was the tenth of Ida and Henry Kruse's twelve children. All of the Kruse children were born in the same room. His father was a blacksmith and undertaker at Waterloo. He was baptised and confirmed in the Carlsruhe Lutheran church just south of Waterloo.

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, Max Bowden, Frank Booth and Billy Wilson. 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 the contract 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 which he operated for over 40 years around Birdsville and in the NE and NW pastoral areas of South Australia. He was also involved working for oil and gas exploration companies including the early days of Santos. He also carted and supplied water to the township of Coober Pedy which later became a successful water desalination business. He worked in the far north until the mid 1980s when he retired with Valma to their family home in Cumberland Park in Adelaide.

In 1952 and 1953, a producer with the Shell Film Unit John Heyer directed *The Back of Beyond*. Tom and his off-sider Henry Butler were recalled to play themselves, delivering mail and supplies along the Birdsville Track. *The Back of Beyond* became an Australian classic and until *Crocodile Dundee*, it was the most awarded Australian made film. The major international award won by *The Back of Beyond* was the *Grand Prix Absolute* at the Venice Film Festival in 1954. 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. It was built in the UK in 1936. It was sold by Crawford's (later CMV) to Harry Ding and then purchased by Tom in 1949. It finally broke down and was abandoned in 1957 on Pandie Pandie Station near Birdsville.

The Badger was located in the desert in 1986 during the *Jubilee Mail Run* re-enactment and was 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 Australia Post and the Badger was named a National Trust Bank SA Icon. In 2010, at a function at the Adelaide Oval, Tom was made a life member of the Longreach Stockman's Hall of Fame.

The Back of Beyond Collection, celebrating the 50th Anniversary of *The Back of Beyond* was released at Marree on July 24th 2004. The CMV Foundation supported the project and the DVDs about Tom's life are distributed by Tom's preferred charity, the Royal Flying Doctor Service. A book about his life, *Mailman of the Birdsville Track* was written by Kristin Weidenbach and published in 2003. The Badger is now permanently housed at the National Motor Museum at Birdwood in the Adelaide Hills.

Since 2008, five bronze busts of Tom Kruse have been unveiled by Tom and Governor-General Michael Jeffery, AC, CVO, MC (Retd), 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, his hometown of 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 Audery Kruse (nee Fuller) passed away on Wednesday August 25th 2010. Valma Kruse was 91 years old.

Tom's funeral, attended by more than 750 family and friends from around Australia, was held at the Morphettville Racecourse in Adelaide at 2.30 pm on Thursday July 7th.

Tom was baptized and confirmed in the Carlsruhe Lutheran Church just south of Waterloo in the mid north of South Australia. The graveyard attached to this church is the last resting place of Tom and Valma's ashes.

Four children, Pauline, Helen, Phillip and Jeffery, eight grandchildren, and eighteen great-grandchildren survive Tom and Valma.

His family and a generation of Australians loved Tom Kruse. He was a hero to many. He will be greatly missed, never forgotten and fondly remembered around many outback bars and campfires.

Written by Ian Doyle
Executive Producer
The Back of Beyond Collection

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