

ADDRESS BY

HIS EXCELLENCY MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL JEFFERY AC  
CVO MC

**GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF  
AUSTRALIA**

ON THE OCCASION OF  
**UNVEILING OF BUST OF TOM KRUSE MBE**  
BIRDWOOD MOTOR MUSEUM, SOUTH AUSTRALIA  
30 MARCH 2008

Good afternoon. May I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today, their wisdom, enduring history and culture.

This is a very special occasion — a chance to recognise two special people; the man who created a legend as the Birdsville Track mailman and his loving wife over so many years.

It's only appropriate that we should be here where the famous and wonderfully restored Leyland Badger rests, the doughty vehicle that made so many journeys up and down the Birdsville Track, expertly piloted by Tom through dust storms, sand and flood.

Marlena and I had the great pleasure of meeting Tom and Valma a few years ago on a two-week trip along the Birdsville Track during the Year of the Outback.

We travelled up from Adelaide to Red Gorge and Iga Warta and then on through Lyndhurst and Marree where Tom used to start his run, then on to Cooper Creek, Charleville, Birdsville and Longreach in Queensland. It was a magnificent experience and brought home to me the reality that you can only really understand and get the sense of this iconic part of our country by actually being there.

And I have strongly encouraged every Australian to take their families for holidays in the bush.

It's not well known that Australia's earliest international trading routes were established by the people of the Torres Strait through trading arrangements between themselves, Papua New Guinea and the Australian mainland. On mainland Australia, a complex system of trade routes criss-crossed the continent, including what we now know as the Birdsville Track.

This has been confirmed through the appearance of pearl shells along the Great Australian Bight which had their origin in the Torres Strait; and ochre, mined in northern South Australia which found its way north along the Track. So Tom's extraordinary journeys reflect a lasting tradition and a kinship with the land and its many moods over thousands of years.

Indeed, Tom and his wife Valma's story is the enduring story of inland Australia.

Those who are captured by the inland become indelibly bound to its unique geography and climate.

They have a deep love of the isolation which encourages innovation, and a love of the bonding so typical of outback communities when they pull together to counter, drought, fire, flood and personal hardships.

And concepts we hold dear as Australians, such as 'helping out a mate' and 'a fair go' grew from the constant fight for survival by Australia's early farmers and settlers in the inland who had to manage a tough environment, subject to all the trepidations of fire, flood and drought.

I spent my earliest years in the small township of Wiluna in the desert goldfields of Western Australia.

I learnt that in a small isolated community everyone has to help each other and the great pride and camaraderie that flows from that.

In any isolated community, one of the most important figures is the mailman and Tom's dogged determination to get through with the precious mail, fuel and supplies — and his larger than life personality — sees him as a true legend of the Outback.

Tom is renowned for his extraordinary physical strength. It was no trouble to throw a few full 44-gallon steel drums on the back of the Leyland by himself when needed. His skills as a bush mechanic were legendary; in the words of the Outback, 'able to get a bucket of bolts going' when need be, and also a dab hand at scrounging the parts necessary to make sure the truck was repaired so the mail got through.

He was also well recognised for his generosity in putting his bush mechanic skills to work on the stations he visited, they being always chronically short of manpower.

His fame as a film star in the 1954 classic *The Back of Beyond* and the more recent *Last Mail from Birdsville* sits lightly on his shoulders and reflects his practical approach to life.

But overall, he is simply known for the tremendous effort he made to do his job and keep the people on the Birdsville Track in touch with the rest of the world and stocked up with supplies.

He has been proudly and lovingly supported by Valma over more than 65 years of marriage — a tremendous journey of their own and one which we celebrate through their children and descendants here today.

And the community acknowledged his service with the award of the MBE in 1955 with a citation which said in part: 'for...services to the community in the outback ...[and] risking his life on many occasions'.

I understand that Lady Aileen Slim, the wife of the then Governor-General Sir William Slim, flew to Birdsville in July 1955 to present the MBE as part of an outback tour.

However, Tom couldn't make it to the investiture — he had been cut off by the floodwaters of the Cooper River as had happened so many times before. Tom finally received his decoration from Sir William Slim at Government House in Adelaide in April 1956, and one of only two Outback mailmen to receive this honour.

Today, we also celebrate Tom's life and work through the first of these magnificent bronze busts produced by Ms Patricia Moseley.

I congratulate the Badger Restoration Group, Neil Weidenbach and Ian Doyle for raising the funds needed to complete the Tom Kruse Bust Project.

The project also attracted significant support from organisations including the CMV Foundation, the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Corrugated Air Productions and a number of private donors.

Well done to you all.

The other busts are to be erected at Birdsville and Marree; fitting tributes to this wonderful icon and legend of the Outback.

I ask you to join me in applauding the significant life and times of Tom Kruse as we unveil this sculpture to celebrate a genuine hero of outback Australia.

**March 30<sup>th</sup> 2008**