

E.G. (Tom) Kruse MBE

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 part of 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 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 Dave and Monty Scobie, Ken and Allan Crombie, Fred Teague, Tommy Robinson and Max Bowden. As we've already heard, the Bowden and Crombie families are represented here this afternoon.

In 1939 Tom helped to transport supplies for Dr. Cecil Madigan to Old Andado Station on the western edge of the Simpson, Dr. Madigan with his party became the second Europeans to cross the Simpson Desert by camel. Dr. Madigan rode a camel – cameleer Bejah Dervish, who later featured in *The Back of Beyond*, walked with his camels. Dr Madigan got the recognition – Bejah did much of the work.

Welcome again to members of Bejah's family who are also with us today. The role the Afghan cameleers played in opening up this country should never be underestimated - nor forgotten.

After his marriage to his sweetheart of some time in Yunta, Valma Fuller in 1942, the newly weds settled here at Marree and became more or less branch managers for Harry Ding's Marree and Lyndhurst operation.

This year, Tom and Valma celebrate their 62nd wedding anniversary – and they said it would never last!

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. Through late 1951 and 1952, Director with the Shell Film Unit John Heyer shot *The Back of Beyond*.

Tom, his off-sider William Henry Butler and the Leyland Badger were recalled to play themselves - delivering mail and supplies along the Birdsville Track. The film was released in 1954 to great acclaim and was screened for the first time in Outback Australia here in Marree 50 years ago to the day – July 24th 1954.

Tom told the bloke he was working for at the time that while he wasn't sure how long the filming would take – it couldn't be more than a week or so. Tom didn't get back to the job for 3 months - to a pretty cool reception from the pastoralist.

As we all now know, *The Back of Beyond* became an international award winning Australian classic. It changed the lives of all those who were part of it.

John Heyer was elevated within the Shell Film Unit - the Heyer family moved to London, Henry and Ethel Butler with their young family moved to Birdsville and Tom Kruse and the Back of Beyond Leyland Badger – well ... they 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 1955 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 – again.

Tom finally received his decoration from Sir William Slim at Government House in Adelaide in April 1956 - one of only two Outback mailmen to receive this Royal honor.

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

The Badger was rescued from 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*.

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 Badger is now housed at the National Motor Museum at Birdwood in the Adelaide Hills. Tom turns 90 next month and Tom and Valma are enjoying their retirement in Adelaide with their family - and a growing number of grand children and great grand children.

Please join with me in recognizing two National Treasures – Tom and Valma Kruse.

Ian Doyle
Executive Producer
The Back of Beyond Collection
July 2004