

*The story
of Australia's
greatest war horse*



BILL *the* BASTARD ROLAND PERRY

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BASTARD
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The recruiting officer at Sydney's Liverpool Army Camp nodded towards the horse corral.

'Break out Bill for Mr Ben Towers,' he said to his assistant.

The merest glance from the assistant back at the officer had the potential new, skinny Light Horseman wondering. He watched as a huge, 730-kilogram chestnut was led into the mounting yard. 'Bill' had a gentle swagger and demeanour yet his size made him imposing. He sauntered behind the assistant. He had a sizeable rump and long back for a Waler, if he was a Waler. His barrel was large, his neck fine and lengthy, and his head was broad. The recruit moved close and reached to stroke his nose.

'Intelligent face,' he mumbled.

The assistant smirked. 'Yeah,' he replied with a chuckle, "intelligent".'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Oh, he knows what he's—' the assistant began.

'Saddle him up!' the officer barked, breaking into the conversation.

'Don't need a saddle,' Towers said.

'Okay, Mr Towers,' the officer said, 'mount him.'

Towers did as instructed. He was lithe in his movements. There was grace in his climb, which was more of a slide into position. Towers sat easily, feeling his charge. Bill was still. He seemed disinterested.

'You've come from Cootamundra?' the officer asked.

'Yep,' Towers said.

'Long ride.'

'Yep. Took a few days.'

'There's a recruiting camp down that way. Knock you back?'

Towers' face reddened. 'I . . . no . . . I wanted to see Sydney.'

'First time?'

The recruit nodded.

'Parents know you're here?'

'They died in a fire five years ago.'

The officer scribbled notes. 'Next of kin?'

'Got an uncle, but we hardly speak.'

'His name?'

'Ah . . . Burke. Fred Burke.'

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The officer glanced at his clipboard. 'You say you were born in June 1897,' he said, 'which makes you seventeen?'

'Yep.'

The officer and the assistant stepped away.

'Take him round the yard,' the officer instructed.

Towers dug his heels in. Bill remained motionless.

'You asleep, Bill?' Towers said, digging harder.

Bill walked a few paces then bucked hard, his considerable hindquarters pushing high. Towers, surprised, fell forward against Bill's neck, but stayed on. Bill trotted a few paces, then wham! His back arched, his tail flew up high again. Towers fought to stay aboard. Bill trotted on, picking up the pace near the yard's fence. He bucked a third time. Towers, mouthing mumbled expletives, hung on, showing outstanding skill. Bill bucked, kicked and baulked, moving very close to the wooden railing.

'Bastard's trying to . . . throw me over . . . the bloody fence!' Towers yelled.

The officer and his assistant stood well back, observing with amused expressions.

'You got 'im!' the officer called. 'Bloody good. You got 'im!'

Towers fought the reins as Bill continued his furious whirl around the yard a metre from the fence. He bucked every ten paces or so, turning his head towards the fence, making it appear that his intent was indeed to see his rider hurtle into the horse corral.

The officer whispered to the assistant: 'Says he's seventeen.'

‘Fifteen tops. I don’t reckon he shaves.’

‘Nah . . . he’s a bloody kid. But he can ride. He sure can ride.’ The officer raised his voice. ‘Right, Mr Towers, pull him in over here.’

The assistant moved cautiously to Bill’s offside to help steady the animal, but Bill was not done yet. He gave one last prodigious leap and kick. Towers was heaved off. He fell hard on his derriere.

‘Bastard!’ he called at Bill, more in shock than through any hurt, except for his pride. The horse turned his head, looked down at Towers and curled his lip.

‘Did you see that?’ Towers said. ‘He bloody well sneered at me!’

‘He’s a real sneerer,’ the officer commented, ‘but he does that to all his victims. His way of saying sorry.’

The assistant led Bill away, his docility returning as fast as it had earlier disappeared.

‘You can ride, Mr Towers,’ the officer said, scribbling notes on his clipboard. ‘How badly do you want to join the Light Horse?’

‘It’s been my dream ever since I could read,’ he said, dusting himself off and wincing as he arched his back. ‘Those books on Gordon of Khartoum, the Indian Mutiny of 1857 . . . you know, those yarns about cavalry charges. That did it for me.’

The officer looked up and held his gaze. ‘War’s not romance, Mr Towers,’ he said. ‘I was in South Africa.’

‘I read about the Boer War . . .’ Towers said, still catching his breath.

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'Yeah, well, this is going to be a big one, much bigger than that.'

'How do you know? The papers say it could be over by Christmas.'

The officer motioned to the corral. 'We hear,' he said, 'that more than ten times the number of nags will be needed than for South Africa. That means a lot of fighting, a lot of casualties, a lot of dead soldiers . . .' He paused. ' . . . and Light Horsemen.'

'Yeah,' Towers said, 'but I'll see the world . . . Paris . . . London . . .'

'Cairo,' the officer murmured, 'Egypt—we hear that's a possibility too.'

'I don't care. I'd see the pyramids. I want to get away from the bush. I'm bored. How else could someone like me get to travel so far?'

'Can you shoot, son?'

'I'm a fair shot,' Towers replied.

The officer looked down at his notes. 'Says here you got second highest score in the rifle test?'

'Yeah, but it was close, one bloke—'

'Hmm,' the officer interrupted, 'how old are you again?'

'You asked me before.'

'But you're older now than when you first told me,' the officer said, holding the recruit's gaze for several seconds before adding, 'why don't you go for a walk around the block and come back a year older?'

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Young Towers at first looked confused, but soon understood the instruction. He hobbled off, rubbing his behind ruefully.

'You gunna sign him up?' the assistant asked when Towers was out of earshot.

The officer nodded. 'No one has stayed that long on Bill,' he mused. 'He was up there more than two minutes. And he's a crack shot.' The officer's lean and lined face creased into a grin. 'Must mean he is eighteen.'

The assistant smiled. 'I'd sign him up even if he couldn't hit a barn door at ten paces. Anyone who can handle Bill like that deserves a chance.'

'Bill the Bastard,' the officer corrected with a shake of his head. 'Ah yeah, he lives up to his name every time.'

The recruiting officers only broke out Bill and others like him if they believed the potential recruit was under eighteen, or a pretender from the city who had hardly ridden before. If he was big for his age and his voice had broken, then the officers would test his riding and shooting skills. If he was a crack shot and could stay on Bill or a couple of the other more temperamental horses, the officers would try to assess the recruit's character and then, if satisfied, would let him lie about his age. The youngest 'liar' was thought to be fourteen, even thirteen years old.

If young recruits ticked those five boxes, they were in, at least before they underwent their medical. Males had to be at least 167 centimetres tall with a chest measurement of 86 centimetres. Again, those who proved strong despite not measuring up were accepted, but a recruit had to have

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good feet. No point in having trouble marching, even in the Light Horse. Mostly, a Light Horseman would dismount and go on foot to a battle. The Light Horsemen were not cavalry. They might ride hard to a battle, then get off and leave their horses with one designated rider. Teeth, too, had to be in fair condition. Dentists would be in short supply, especially in remote battle areas. Colour-blindness was tested but recruits could cheat by memorising charts.

The colour of a recruit's skin was another issue. Since Federation the government had had a 'White Australia Policy', which reached absurd technical depths in army recruiting. Aborigines were not allowed into the forces (at least until later when there was a manpower shortage and many criteria were relaxed), yet those who claimed 'British' family somewhere among their antecedents—even Indians—were taken in.

The acquisition of horses for the two main theatres of war—the Western Front in Europe, and the Eastern Front in the Middle East—was easier. It didn't matter about their background or breeding. They had to be disease-free and strong, which when translated into desert work and battles meant they had to be hardy and durable. The Waler—the peculiarly local horse named for its state of origin (New South Wales)—was the main equine export and featured in the Boer War at the turn of the nineteenth century, when four Australian colonies provided mounted regiments for the first time in a major conflict. World War I, which began in 1914, would be dominated by Walers

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in the Australian Light Horse force. They usually stood between fourteen and sixteen hands, weighed half a tonne (500 kilograms) on average and were sired by English thoroughbreds from breeding mares that were often part draughthorse. But after many generations the Walers had the benefit of genetic input from the Welsh pony, Timor pony and brumby. This cross-fertilisation had proved useful on the veldt in South Africa, yet no one was sure how Walers would fare in the brutal and hot deserts of the Middle East, if they ended up there. The only indicator was that they often had experience of running wild in Australia's vast semi-arid regions. That had to be a helpful background in coping with a harsh climate.

Bill the Bastard looked as if he had just about every possible gene in his make-up. He was much bigger than the average Waler at more than seventeen hands, which suggested an Arab stallion in the background. There was something of the shanks of a draughthorse, and his legs were long and strong. His sleek neck also bespoke a thoroughbred's genetic input. His eyes were cool yet at the same time alert. Nothing seemed to ruffle him. Instead he ruffled others, especially riders, if he chose. And he always did. There was something in his independent nature that would not allow him to be dominated. His existence was on human terms when it came to his capture and work, but when it came to the rider and mount interplay, he wanted figuratively to be on top, not the man in the saddle. Bill the Bastard had never been fully broken in. In this he wasn't alone in the round-up of horses about to be shipped to

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Europe and the Middle East. The army would be relying on hundreds of Australian trainers who would be transported to its remount depots. Their job would be to attend to partly broken-in horses that would have to be worked up to battle readiness.

The recruiting officer commissioned to organise the shipping from Liverpool wanted to hold Bill back. 'No one will be able to ride him,' the officer told his assistant. 'What would be the point in shipping him? Couldn't use him in a charge or any stunt, for that matter.'

'He'd make a terrific packhorse.'

'If they could get anything on him,' the officer said, rolling a cigarette.

'He really only hates riders. I've used him a few times to carry a big load.'

'Hmm,' the officer murmured, lighting the cigarette. 'He is the biggest and strongest bugger I've seen in forty years.'

'I'd send him,' the assistant urged. 'At least he'd give the blokes in the remount section a bit of fun.'

The officer chortled. He liked that thought.