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WENDY LEWIS

JAILBREAK

AUSTRALIA'S MOST UNFORGETTABLE PRISON ESCAPES

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For my mother and father,
with love

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INTRODUCTION

The 1970s was the golden age of Australian jailbreaks, if you can call it that. This was the decade when the big names made their escapes: think Raymond Denning and Russell Cox. It was the era of armed bank robberies and big payroll jobs, now a thing of the past. Jails were constantly in the news for the wrong reasons: Katingal, Jika Jika, Grafton, Boggo Road …

It was the era when no politician in their right mind would go near the Corrective Services portfolio because there were so many problems: the number of escapes and attempted escapes was at an all-time high, and prisons were falling apart, in some cases literally. Some prisons that had been built in the late 1880s had not changed at all – sections of Long Bay had no electricity and no running water in the cells. At Boggo Road, the cells had no toilets and the food was lousy, to put it politely. Jails around the country were understaffed and overcrowded. The 1970s saw a number of serious prison riots, deliberately lit fires, mass protests, mass breakouts and violent deaths. In 1975, the Secretary of the Victorian Prison Officers' Vocational Branch, John Horton, said, 'We are fighting 1975 criminals with 1890, and earlier, institutions.'[1]

In those early colonial days, living conditions were hard everywhere, and prisons were no exception. Penal settlements of the 1800s tended to be in the most isolated settings possible. St Helena Island, off Brisbane, was one such place; Macquarie Harbour Penal Station on Sarah

Island, off the west coast of Van Diemen's Land, was another. Convicts were a determined bunch, hightailing it into the bush at any available opportunity and putting themselves through hell to escape. Weak and hungry with next to no survival skills, it was not uncommon for convict absconders to starve to death or die of exhaustion. Alexander Pearce, the demon cannibal of Tasmania, is a good example of what men are driven to do.

The 1900s was a very different time. 'Gentler' is probably not the right word, but there was a very different culture. By the 1940s and 50s, criminals got around in snappy suits and felt hats. Newspapers' hyperbole described the panic that decent citizens felt every time a desperate/crazed/cunning/dangerous criminal escaped. Bank robberies were rare in the 40s and 50s; crims were 'small time', making a living doing break and enters, stealing from shops or factories, and then selling goods down at the pub. Big names included Victoria's Ronald Ryan, who flogged off anything from lawnmowers to cardigans; New South Wales' Darcy Dugan; and Queensland's Arthur 'Slim' Halliday, both of the latter infamous serial escapees. These were men who had grown up in tough times, neglected and institutionalised. When you look at how much they had to cope with, it's not surprising that their lives were a constant battle to stay on the straight and narrow. Ryan ended up in Pentridge and escaped with tragic consequences. Halliday and Dugan made no less than 22 escape attempts between them, Halliday mainly from Brisbane's Boggo Road and Dugan from too many places to mention.

The 1960s saw the rise of a dangerous new species: the armed bank robber. The prototype was the dapper John Killick, who shot to fame decades later in a Hollywood-style helicopter jailbreak. Back then there were no time-delay mechanisms, security guards or bulletproof shields, and robbers jumped onto the counter and made everyone lie on

the floor while tellers scooped their takings into money bags. Inside jails there was an established pecking order, a well-defined criminal code, and you played by the rules or else, a mindset that continued into the 1970s and 80s.

Since the 1990s, more prisoners have gone inside for drug-related crimes. They may be drug addicts themselves; their behaviour is erratic, and not based on any long-established criminal code. In such a changing culture, old-school rules have gone out the window. It's also become much harder to escape, although there'll always be the ones who won't stop trying – Brenden Abbott, the so-called 'Postcard Bandit', is a good example. Advances in security, technology and construction have meant that not many jailbreaks have hit the headlines in the 2000s, although Stephen Jamieson's entertaining escape from Goulburn in 2015 got everyone talking.

***

But what drives someone to escape? Is it sheer recklessness? A desperation that comes from having nothing left to lose? Or something else? Funnily enough, about half of all jailbreaks are motivated by family issues. Like the rest of us, prisoners have brothers and sisters, partners and children, and the simple fact is that they miss them. In many cases, their families are financially dependent on them, and inmates can feel that responsibility deeply. An escape attempt may be sparked by a desire to see them and make things better, although in reality it will only make things worse.

Sometimes it's a special occasion that triggers an escape. It's not unheard of for prisoners to escape for a birthday or wedding anniversary or some such thing. Carl Synnerdahl escaped in time for his wife's twenty-first, and a handful of prisoners escaped in the lead-up to their own birthdays – Ray Denning is one. Escapes spike around Christmas and Easter

time, too, but this could be not so much due to festive cheer but because of a disrupted routine and casual staff rostered on.

Sometimes it's the burning desire to be reunited with a lover. Lucy Dudko, who had never committed a criminal act in her life, threw it all away to rescue her man from Silverwater in a helicopter. Julie 'Angel of Death' Cashman escaped twice from Mulawa with the help of two different men, each time madly in love with one of them. Peter Gibb escaped from Melbourne Remand with inside help from a lover who risked everything to get him out. Sadly, in all three cases, love ultimately didn't conquer all.

Of course, there's always the cheery souls who get an adrenalin buzz from making plans to escape, and see it as a personal challenge. Serial escapee Darcy Dugan, who spent half his life in jail, had such a philosophy, and it's fair to say he did his best, notching up six jailbreaks and six notable attempts. He had a no-nonsense perspective on the question of motivation: '… the warders' job was to keep me in custody. My job was to get out …'[2]

Some criminals are capable and calculating; they escape because they can, not averse to using violence to achieve their goals. This type of escapee keeps their head down, thinks through their plans dispassionately, and then acts. Russell Cox pulled off one such breakout from the 'escape-proof' Katingal and proved his resourcefulness by lasting a record-breaking 10 years, nine months and 18 days on the run. Ian 'Rabbit' Steele was another criminal who kept to himself, escaped successfully, and managed to get to the UK where he was finally caught, although not before murdering his girlfriend.

Inmates may simply escape because they don't want to be there. This is different from *wanting* to get out; they *have* to get out because they live in fear. They may be verbally or physically abused every day, victims of standover tactics, or

frightened of being bashed, raped or murdered. For these inmates, their primary motivation for escape is to get *away*, not necessarily to get back into the outside world.

Another strong motivation to get out is a sense of hopelessness. It may be that their future is uncertain and they try to escape from what they see as an unbearable situation: they may face extradition to another state far away from their family; they may have been refused parole, or given an indeterminate sentence with no clear release date. Kevin Simmonds, pin-up boy of 1959, saw such a bleak future ahead that he chose the only way out he thought possible.

The people in this book are murderers, armed robbers and thieves. They range from the non-violent – such as the mischievous young Max Skinner – to the extremely violent – like multiple murderer Robert Wright – but their stories all have a common thread: each one of them is authentic, gripping and real. Every story gives insight into a life gone wrong, and what it is to fight for something, whether it's freedom, vengeance or love. In every story there is an unstoppable spirit, a drive that's hard to imagine unless you have been locked behind bars. It's a desperation that comes from feeling you have nothing to lose. It's a fighting spirit, a refusal to follow the rules. But it comes at a cost. If you attempt to escape, you'll end up in a worse situation than before. You'll lose privileges. You'll get a longer sentence. If you're caught you may well be shot dead. It's a huge risk to take, but the men and women in these stories all thought it was worth the risk. See what you think.

SECTION 1

STOP AT NOTHING

ENOUGH TO MAKE YOUR FLESH CRAWL
ALEXANDER PEARCE

Witness said to the prisoner, 'how could you do such a deed as this?' he answered, 'no person can tell what he will do when driven by hunger.' Witness then said, 'where is the head?' the answer was, 'I left it with the body.' Witness searched for and found it a few yards off under the shade of a fallen tree …
— Hobart Town Gazette, 1824[1]

From 1822 to 1833, convicts were sent to Macquarie Harbour Penal Station on Sarah Island, off the west coast of Van Diemen's Land. It was a desolate place, reached by boat through a dangerous narrow channel known as Hell's Gates. Convicts who tried to escape had to contend with wild seas and treacherous rocks, or starvation if they reached the impenetrable rainforests of the mainland. Even soldiers who set out in pursuit were sometimes never heard of again. Alexander Pearce is one of the few who escaped from Sarah Island, not once but twice, and made it through the south-western Tasmanian wilderness in a macabre tale that has taken on a mythology all of its own.

***

Alexander Pearce was transported to Van Diemen's Land from County Armagh in Northern Ireland in 1819. For his crime of stealing six pairs of boots, he received seven years – 14 months for each pair. There followed a string of misdemeanours: stealing two turkeys and three ducks, stealing a wheelbarrow, stealing a wine glass, and a couple of drunk and disorderly charges. These were harsh times and most of the transgressions landed him with hard labour and 50 lashes with a cat o' nine tails. In May 1822 he escaped (or absconded, as they used to say) from his work gang and a £10 reward was offered for his recapture. In July 1822, one 'A. Pearse' [sic] was found guilty of being 'absent in the bush' and sentenced to transportation to Macquarie Harbour Penal Station on Sarah Island for the rest of his sentence.[2]

At Sarah Island, he met up with other convicts and absconders. The seven of interest are: Alexander Dalton, convicted of perjury; a Scottish baker named John Mather, convicted of forging a £15 note; Thomas Bodenham (also known as Bodham), an ex-highwayman; Bill Cornelius, aka Kennerly, a fellow absconder; Edward Brown; Robert Greenhill, a Middlesex sailor; and Matthew Travers. Greenhill and Travers had been given 150 lashes and were shipped off to Sarah Island two months earlier for absconding; a couple of weeks later they tried again, and, fortunately for them, 'as they appeared very sorry for their offence', they received a mere 25 lashes each.[3]

***

On 20 September 1822, the eight men were cutting timber at Kelly Basin on the south-east side of Macquarie Harbour when they decided to take their chances. They stole two boats and sailed to the coalminers' stores at Coal Head, further along the bay, where they took enough food to last them a

week. It wasn't much. In those days, two ounces of food per person – a little over 50 grams – was a typical daily ration for a convict.

Their plan was to wait in a boat outside the heads at Hell's Gates for a larger vessel to pick them up. Once on board they would seize control of the ship and sail home to England. But from Coal Head they could see fires had been lit along the beach, signifying their escape, and they knew that soldiers would be coming after them. They abandoned the boats and took off into the bush with their meagre provisions, a prayer book and two axes.

They made a new plan: to reach Hobart Town and *then* steal a boat and sail back to England. But as was so wisely written at the time: 'The bush of these colonies is not so kind to wanderers as the island home of Crusoe … the stern bush of Tasmania is especially unfriendly …'[4]

Alexander Pearce and his companions had no idea of the extreme conditions they would face, or how difficult it would be to survive. To put it in perspective, in 2009 six Tasmanians set out to trace the path that Pearce et al. had followed. Despite being physically fit and well equipped, they lost all sense of direction in the dense vegetation. They battled spiky undergrowth, scrub as tall as they were, and weather that turned from rain to sleet in an instant; at times they could see no further than one metre ahead.[5] In their first four days, this highly experienced group of bushwalkers covered just three kilometres.

From day one, Pearce and his companions were in much worse shape than those who were part of the 2009 expedition. Once their supplies ran out, they survived for nine days on boiled tea-tree and peppermint eucalypt shoots. Bill Cornelius joked that he was so hungry he could eat 'a piece of a man' and Bob Greenhill, the sailor, spoke ominously of 'customs of the sea', things that seafarers considered right and proper

in times of crisis. The captain going down with the ship was one of them; shipwreck survivors eating their fellow survivors to survive was another. Greenhill told the ragtag bunch of convicts that he had in fact eaten human flesh; not only that, but it had tasted 'like a little pork'.[6]

On a hill overlooking Macquarie Harbour, Greenhill made a grisly proposition. He suggested they should cast lots to decide who should die to save the rest from starving to death. That awful night, the men literally set up different camps: Dalton, Brown and Cornelius around one campfire, Pearce and the others around another. The former three were appalled at the idea, while Pearce and the others were more open-minded, although Mather was brave enough to call it what it was: murder.

Dalton, Brown and Cornelius had reasons to be worried. Dalton hadn't endeared himself to the others back at Sarah Island, having volunteered to give fellow convicts a flogging, so if they were going to select the least popular man, it would be him. Brown, who was injured, probably came to the conclusion that he could be next, while Cornelius, who was slightly built and one of the oldest in the group, probably feared something similar. Overnight, these three set off together to get back to Macquarie Harbour, preferring to face the hellish conditions there.

The 2009 expedition found that the only way forward through the scrub at times was to climb up onto it, pull it down to knee height, crush it by stepping on it, and repeat the process. Sometimes they had to use their combined weight to push against the incredibly tough vines to get through, and even in clearer patches of forest there were decaying trees lying on top of the scrub, making progress painfully slow and hazardous.

Dalton didn't make it, but the other two 'unhappy wretches' did, although they were both such wrecks by the

time they got back that they died of exhaustion soon after.[7]

After Dalton, Brown and Cornelius made their escape, the five remaining men delayed their awful decision for another two or three days, surviving on wild berries. They were so desperate for food that they ate their kangaroo skin coats after a good roasting. On day 11, they reached a fast-flowing river they took to be Gordon River – it was actually the Franklin – and stayed there for two nights, looking in vain for something edible and trying to find a safe place to cross.

They found a point where a rock extended halfway out into the river. Pearce, Greenhill and Mather swam across to the rock and then dragged Travers and Bodham across with a length of acacia, as they couldn't swim. They lit a fire and planned to stay overnight but Mather begged to stay longer. When Mather almost lost the flint that lit their fires, Travers ran at him with an axe, threatening to kill him. That night the five exhausted men found shelter in a cleft of rocks, cold, wet and maddeningly hungry.

After four more days beating their way through yet more scrub, the situation couldn't go on. It was then they decided that Thomas Bodham would be the first victim. According to Pearce, Bodham accepted this 'with remarkable calmness', although he probably had little idea of his fate until Travers held him down and Greenhill raised an axe above his head.[8]

Pearce later claimed that he had been collecting firewood at the time, but must have had in mind that the flames would be used to roast his ex-companion. Around the fire, they agreed that everyone had to eat some of Bodham so that none of them could later claim innocence and testify against the others. Pearce, Greenhill and Travers agreed but Mather couldn't come at human flesh and tucked into some fern roots, which were utterly indigestible. With Bodham 'gone', Greenhill took the opportunity to pilfer his shoes.

The next three or four days were spent crossing the

boggy Loddon Plains, aka 'The Sodden Loddons'. There was plentiful water and even kangaroos and emus, but they apparently did not consider them a source of food. Or perhaps they tried and failed to catch something.

Mather's resistance to eating human flesh hadn't gone down well. After an argument with Greenhill, Greenhill suggested to Pearce that Mather should be the next to go. They gave him the prayer book and half an hour to pray, then Travers and Pearce held him down while Greenhill smashed his skull with the axe. They spent the next three or four days living on Mather's remains before moving on towards a looming mountain range.

By this time Travers was a liability; he couldn't swim and his foot was inflamed from snakebite. They camped for four nights at the base of the mountains so he could recover and then crossed the range, but two days further along, his foot began to turn black and Greenhill and Pearce agreed that he would be their next meal, despite his being Greenhill's dearest friend. Pearce again went off for firewood while Greenhill did the deed, bashing Travers to death with the axe and slitting his throat.

They survived on his remains for some days, crossed another mountain range, and found 'a most delightful part of the country', green and grass-covered.[9] But the recurring cycle of hunger and distrust started up again, and now there were just two men left to circle each other and make their move. They couldn't sleep for fear that they would not wake up: '… their wants were dreadful – each strove to catch the other off his guard, and kill him'.[10]

One night when Greenhill could keep his eyes open no longer, Pearce grabbed the opportunity and gave him an axe blow to the head.

Pearce lived on Greenhill's thigh and arm for the next four days, then went for three days without food. He decided to

hang himself with a piece of leather but changed his mind. At last he came to the Derwent River, where he feasted on pieces of possum in the remains of a campfire. But the past weeks had taken their toll on Alexander Pearce: 'More desirous to die than to live, he called out, as loudly as he could, expecting the Natives would hear him, and come to put an end to his existence!'[11]

But no one came.

***

Despite the horrors of his journey and the physical torture, Pearce continued on. He found a boggy section, now known as McGuire's Marsh, where he caught two ducklings by standing waist-deep in water. He pushed on and at the top of a hill saw a large mountain, which he believed to be Tabletop Mountain. Near a river he spotted a flock of sheep and managed to catch a lamb, which he ate raw.

The sheep keeper caught him, but instead of shooting Pearce dead, as well he may have, he took pity on him, looking after him in his hut for three days. Pearce then followed the river to an escaped convicts' hideout on the outskirts of Hobart Town; he had reached his goal, after 113 appalling days of hardship, deprivation and butchery.

Early one morning soon after, soldiers surrounded the hut and he was rounded up along with the rest of the escapees. No one believed his story; it was so outrageous that authorities assumed he had made it up to protect his fellow convicts, who must be still at large somewhere in the wilds.[12]

Pearce was shipped back to Sarah Island.

***

Now regarded as 'a sort of hero' by his 'depraved companions', Pearce was put to work in the same gang as the young and game Thomas Cox, who kept badgering him to escape again.[13] Understandably, Pearce wasn't interested until Cox showed him some fishhooks, a knife, and some burnt rag to use to light a fire, which made him think they might have a chance. At the time, Pearce had just received a good flogging, not for stealing a shirt but for having his shirt stolen. He decided to bite the bullet.

On Thursday 13 November 1823, they absconded from Logan's gang, taking an axe each, and bolted into the forest, hacking their way through the bush for two days. On the third day they came to a beach, and after two more days, they arrived at King's River, now known as King River, well aware that soldiers were hot on their trail. They hid in the forest for three or four days, observing the soldiers' camp from their hiding spot.

But there, as Cox slept, Pearce attacked him with three blows to the head with his axe. The dying Cox quietly pleaded to be put out of his misery so Pearce finished him off with a fourth blow. He dragged him out of the forest, hacked the body into pieces, and roasted a piece of thigh in the dying flames of the fire the soldiers had left when they decamped. He ate some and set out again, taking the rest with him. He crossed the river, believing he was heading for Port Dalrymple, although he may have again misjudged his distances, as Port Dalrymple was way up on the north coast, 200 kilometres away.

After a day and a night, something made Pearce stop and retrace his steps. He flung the cooked body parts of Thomas Cox into the river and stood waiting in Cox's clothes. When the schooner *Waterloo* from Sarah Island came into view, he lit a signal fire on the beach and was picked up by a pilot ship. He explained that Cox had drowned and his pockets were

searched; in one was a chunk of flesh. 'It's a piece of Cox and I brought it to show that he is lost', he said.[14]

He was taken back to Macquarie Harbour, where he confessed all to the commandant, Lieutenant John Cuthbertson, 'being weary of life, and willing to die for the misfortunes and atrocities into which he had fallen'.[15] The next day, the commandant made his coxswain Thomas Smith return to the beach with Pearce to find Cox's body. In a sense they found it: 'The head was away, the hands cut off, the bowels were torn out, and the greater part of the … thighs gone, as were the calf … and the fleshy parts of the arms …' When Smith asked, 'Where is the head?' he was told, 'I left it with the body.' Smith found the head, and also picked up what appeared to be a liver, and an axe stained with blood. When he asked Pearce if that was the axe he'd used to kill Cox, Pearce answered, 'It was.'[16] He apparently killed Cox because he couldn't swim.

This time the authorities believed his story.

Alexander Pearce was hanged at Hobart Town on 19 July 1824. The night before he died, he told Reverend Phillip Connolly, a fellow Irishman from County Armagh, about his two escapes in gory detail, and these are the stories we have to this day.

AUSTRALIA'S BIGGEST MANHUNT

KEVIN SIMMONDS AND LESLIE NEWCOMBE

WANTED
By 500 fearless coppers
300 righteous treasure-hunting civilians
armed with submachine guns, pistols and teargas-guns
USING fleets of cars with two-way radios
A helicopter
The State Treasury
And four bloodhounds
LED BY Sgt Ray Kelly acknowledged killer of 3 men
SOOLED ON by four Sydney newspapers
ONE MAN
FOR defiance, courage, impertinence, enterprise, theft, audacity, endurance

———————

Alive or preferably
DEAD
— A provocative 'Wanted' poster printed by an underground student press and posted around Sydney, 1959[1]

The manhunt for Kevin John Simmonds and Leslie Allan Newcombe had Australia spellbound for 37 days in 1959. It was the first live coverage of a news event on Australian television, and every day the papers reported every conceivable detail, ranging from how big the leeches were

in the bush north of Sydney (apparently as long as a man's finger) to the fact that Simmonds was arrested wearing a faded brown ladies' jumper. Kevin Simmonds and Les Newcombe unintentionally became the focus of a national drama bordering on the obsessive, but, sadly, their incredible escape had tragic long-term consequences.

***

Kevin Simmonds was inside Long Bay doing 15 years for three armed robberies, multiple break and enters and car thefts. Leslie Newcombe, who shared a cell, was doing three-and-a-half for housebreaking. One Saturday afternoon, while watching an old movie in the prison chapel, Simmonds noticed a big ventilator in the wall and volunteered for cleaning duty the next week to get a closer look. He noted that the chapel walls were 30 centimetres thick and the ventilator was 60 centimetres high, big enough to climb through. When the others were upstairs, he smashed a corner of a stained-glass window to check what was outside. There was a yard enclosed by a wall that possibly backed onto the women's prison, and another wall he knew backed onto the superintendent's yard, complete with Holden in the garage.

***

On the morning of Friday 9 October 1959, Simmonds and Newcombe stole a hammer from the workshop because the inmate who was planning to give them a specially shaped iron bar to prise off the lock of the chapel door wasn't there at the time. During lunchbreak, they put civvies on under their prison clothes and handed a forged pass to the warder at the gate, who let them through into the chapel courtyard. Opposite the chapel, a handful of prisoners

were having a smoko outside the bakery and an armed warder was positioned 50 metres away, looking in the other direction.

Simmonds smashed the chapel door with two blows and the bakery prisoners scurried away. Once inside, he pulled the metal slats off the ventilator and they both squeezed through to the outside. They clambered over some oil drums in the corner of the yard and climbed up onto the wall, where they found themselves looking down on the superintendent's garden, just as Simmonds had visualised. He jemmied the lock off the garage door and was hot-wiring the car when an armed warder appeared. 'What the …' was all the warder managed to say.[2]

They took off on foot, past a wood-chopping work party hooting encouragement. Simmonds ran on ahead to Prince Henry Hospital carpark and waved down a car, explaining there'd been an accident. It was probably not the best line to use in front of a hospital – the car was full of nurses who were only too happy to help except Simmonds didn't want their help; he wanted their car.

As Newcombe caught up, Simmonds was trying to pull the driver out, but she refused to move, clinging to the steering wheel. Newcombe slapped her face and, in shock, she released her death grip. The five nurses got out as fast as they could and Newcombe and Simmonds took off in the not-so-speedy old Morris.

They abandoned the car near Botany Cemetery, where the gardener gave them a friendly wave as they jogged by. Down below they saw a factory that looked like a potential hideout but as they made their way down the hill, they realised the 'factory' was no less than Botany police station. They made a hasty retreat and buried themselves with leaves and branches in the bush near the cemetery. They were right in the thick of the search so they stayed buried until nightfall.

After dark, they made their way to Maroubra through the bush, commando-style. More than once an officer on stakeout gave his position away by smoking or murmured conversation. Around 2 a.m. on Saturday morning, they stole a car, tinned food and clothes – although they couldn't find shoes that fitted – and headed for Moore Park Showground, the venue for the Sydney Royal Easter Show for over 100 years. It was an ideal hideout, with farmyard stalls, bales of hay and storage facilities. That night they slept on a raised platform in the pig pavilion and then listened to the radio morning news: 'More than four hundred police, and a Naval helicopter, are continuing the search in the Malabar district for Long Bay Gaol escapees, Kevin John Simmonds and Leslie Allan Newcombe …'[3]

On Saturday night they drove to Emu Plains Prison Farm in another stolen car. It doesn't make sense to bust out of one prison and break into another one, but Newcombe had done time at Emu Plains. He knew the routine and knew they could get weapons, food and clothes in one hit. He also knew there was only one warder on duty overnight.

They hid in a prison shed until 11.15 p.m., then took a baseball bat and cricket stump from a sports storeroom. At midnight they watched the shift change, then moved in towards the office.

As the new prison officer came out for his first patrol, Simmonds swung at him with the baseball bat, forcing him backwards into the office. But the officer was still on his feet, so Simmonds made a split-second decision to bash him unconscious. As the officer reached for his gun, Simmonds swiped at him and missed, but he now had him backed into the corner. He bashed him again and again on the head until he fell to the floor, unconscious. 'He was still standing firmly on his feet. I must have hit him too hard and too often', Simmonds would later tell the court.[4]

Simmonds went outside and retched, then returned and put a handkerchief under the man's head to soak up the blood. They stole the weapons and supplies they had come for and drove back to the showground in the officer's car. The report came through on their radio overnight: Warder Cecil Mills, 40, of Springwood, had been brutally bashed to death.

Simmonds' fingerprints were found at the scene. He had taken his gloves off to take the handkerchief out of Mills' pocket and hadn't put them back on.

On Monday night, the New South Wales State Government held an emergency meeting. The riot squad was put on standby, the public was told to lock all vehicles, and a reward of £1000 was offered for information leading to the arrest of Kevin Simmonds and Leslie Newcombe. Police warned that the escapees were armed and dangerous and should under no circumstances be approached.[5]

***

Over the next week there were sightings all over the country, from Randwick Racecourse in Sydney to Western Australia. The Criminal Investigation Branch (CIB) at Surry Hills was inundated with hundreds of phone calls. On 15 October there was a flurry of activity at Tantangara in the Snowy Mountains after a post office was robbed of £4150, the robbery having similarities to a string of jobs Simmonds had carried out earlier in the year. All around the country, watches were kept on airports and shipping terminals, but through all this frenetic police activity, Newcombe and Simmonds were sitting tight at the showground at Moore Park.

They set off for Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, north of Sydney, on the evening of Saturday 17 October. Newcombe had spent time fishing there and knew the caves along the creek would be an ideal base. All he needed was a map, but

despite stealing seven cars overnight they didn't find a street directory in any of them.

Pre-dawn Sunday they broke into a delicatessen at Mona Vale and helped themselves to salamis and chocolate. As Newcombe loaded up boxes of food, Simmonds kept lookout but took off when he saw a man approach, believing him to be an undercover officer. Newcombe waited for half an hour, then set off in another stolen car to find him, forgetting to take the food with him. Three kilometres away, he found Simmonds' abandoned car and decided to return to the showground and wait.

***

Newcombe hid out at the showground for five days but Simmonds didn't show. On Friday night, he stole a car in Paddington, figuring that Simmonds must have gone on ahead to Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. A roadblock set up in Oxford Street didn't faze him, as they were quite routine in the area, but before he even got to the roadblock, a police van pulled out in front of him, forcing him to brake suddenly.

Unbeknownst to Newcombe, when he had stolen the car he had driven right by the owner, who was chatting with a friend on the corner. Surprised to see her car go past, she and her friend set off in hot pursuit, only to be pulled over for speeding. They explained their story to the traffic officer and within 15 minutes the roadblock was up and running, not to sniff out Simmonds and Newcombe, but to nab whoever had stolen her Holden.

As the police officer approached the car Newcombe raised his hands above his head, fearing the worst. But the officer was more stunned than Newcombe was to see who was in the driver's seat. Newcombe was taken to the CIB and placed in 'OBS', a so-called observation cell where the light burned

23 and a half hours a day, and for the other 30 minutes he was allowed out to pace up and down a 10-metre corridor. This was where he spent his twenty-first birthday.

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The man Simmonds thought was after him wasn't an undercover officer, and the Mona Vale deli theft was not reported immediately.[6] But after Newcombe had been found in the stolen car, the manhunt switched from the eastern suburbs to the Northern Beaches.

Simmonds slipped through the net and camped out in the bush around Frenchs Forest for several days, where he heard the news of Newcombe's arrest. He set off for Coal and Candle Creek in Ku-ring-gai Chase, not far from where Newcombe had suggested they go, and once there, he drove off the road and covered the car with branches to form a kind of car cave. Over a number of days, he dug out a big pit approximately 2.5 × 3.5 × 5 metres with the idea of towing back a caravan he'd seen further up the road and burying it next to the car to make more comfortable digs.

But on Thursday 5 November, Colin Green, a park ranger, and David Hyde, a boatshed employee, noticed something odd about the landform along the road, and when they pulled over they heard strange noises. What they found was a stark naked man digging a trench in the middle of nowhere. Simmonds pulled a pistol on them and tied them up, offering to release them if they didn't go to the police until morning. He took off in their ute with shovels, provisions and, finally, a map.

They freed themselves and raised the alarm at the boatshed. More than a hundred police descended on Ku-ring-gai Chase on the lookout for an armed man with three weeks' growth driving a blue-grey Morris Oxford ute.

The next day, Simmonds was spotted near Wyong after he sped away from a roadblock. A police motorcyclist gave chase and kept up pursuit on foot through bush near Wyong Creek, until Simmonds threatened him with a pistol and told him to walk back up the hill or else. By this stage Simmonds had stolen some clothes and shoes but he lost the shoes somewhere in the creek, and left his soaking wet shirt behind too. He pushed on for eight more hours in a singlet and shorts and made it to a vantage point known as Jilliby Ridge.

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One month had gone by since the escape, and the search for Kevin Simmonds was intense, with 500 police with teargas and submachine guns, naval helicopters and police dogs out looking for him. But things didn't look bright: 'Simmonds could be anywhere in those hills watching us', said a police spokesperson. 'It's just a living hell in that bush. We could pass within a foot of him and never know it.'[7]

Search conditions were rough. It was wet and foggy, and the bush was thick and often impenetrable. The dogs lost their scent, visibility was poor and the sticky conditions brought out ticks and leeches. Simmonds slipped the net, following the powerlines to the outskirts of Morisset about 15 kilometres north, where he found a small church with a trapdoor in the floor. He hid under the floorboards for 48 hours, cold and wet and surrounded by cobwebs; he was still hiding there when the minister gave a Sunday sermon about doing good and turning the other cheek.

He stuck it out while the authorities grew increasingly discouraged. As the search reached its peak, all the newspapers could say was that police were waiting for him to make a mistake.

On Friday 13 November, as the search entered its sixth week, he reached Mulbring, 30 kilometres further north of Morisett. On Saturday afternoon an exhausted and nearly starving Simmonds broke cover to look for food and was spotted by two Mulbring farmers. Alsatian tracker dogs flown in from Adelaide – Dawn and Chrissie were their names – took off after him and tracked him for five kilometres along the flooding Wallis Creek. As Simmonds crossed the creek, he was swept along for 500 metres and lost his revolver. He pushed on overnight, walking another 10 kilometres north.

At 4.30 a.m. on Sunday 15 November, Simmonds was seen hot-wiring a car on the outskirts of Kurri Kurri. He took off but nearly collided with a milk van, which valiantly gave chase. He became disoriented in the fog and ended up at a dead end near Central Park, Stanford Merthyr. He did a tight U-turn and headed straight for the milk van; the van screeched out of the way and the milkmen emerged unscathed to see Simmonds limping across the field, leaving dewy footprints in the grass.

Police were on the spot in 15 minutes. As a car patrolled the railway line close to the field, the police officers noticed horses moving away from a clump of trees. When the horses looked back at the trees, their ears were pricked and alert. They were onto something. The officers climbed through the barbed-wired fence and approached the ironbarks. At the sight of them, Simmonds held up his hands and took two paces away from the tree. They levelled their guns at him in a confusion of shouting, and he told them he was unarmed, which was true. He was filthy, exhausted and soaked to the skin. His face was smeared with charcoal, he was covered with tick bites and leeches, and he was wearing two pairs of socks over his lacerated feet. Sergeant Ray Kelly told him to lower his hands and he was handcuffed.

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As news of the capture spread, hundreds of onlookers lined the streets of Kurri Kurri for over a kilometre to catch a glimpse of Kevin Simmonds, take photos, and yell out words of encouragement. He was a killer but he was also an underdog, a fighter, tenacious, resourceful and not bad looking. And he didn't seem to mind the attention. He was driven to Wyong police station, scoffing 'nine big sandwiches, a quarter of a pound of chocolate, an apple and six biscuits', provided by police,[8] and telling them that if he'd been as well fed as they were he wouldn't have been caught. He then had a bath and a doctor gave him an anti-tetanus injection and treated him for cuts, bruises and lacerations.

Simmonds told them he had planned to hitch a ride on a semitrailer to Cessnock, lay low, then steal enough money to get out of the country, maybe to New Zealand. That night he was charged with the murder of prison officer Cecil Mills and escaping from lawful custody, with other charges to follow. A few days later his parents drove from Griffith to Long Bay to see him.

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The murder trial in March 1960 only lasted four days. Simmonds' fingerprints were found on a broken piece of china near Mills' body, on Mills' car and on another stolen car found near Emu Plains Prison Farm. The post-mortem showed that death was caused by multiple fractures of the skull and lacerations to the brain.

Both men claimed that they did not go to Emu Plains with the intention of causing harm or injury. Simmonds told the court that he had meant to knock Mills unconscious, not kill him. As to the accusation that he had a reckless indifference

to human life, his defence pointed out that when confronted by the ranger and boat hand at Ku-ring-gai Chase, Simmonds knew he was a wanted man, and he could have shot them both dead to stop them going to the police. But he didn't.

Simmonds and Newcombe pleaded not guilty to murder. On 18 March 1960, they were found guilty of manslaughter, not murder, but Justice McClemmens described it as the worst case of manslaughter he had come across. 'There has been a lot of maudlin sympathy for these two men . . .' he said in a speech that cited other acts of horrific violence against prison officers and declared the need for justice.[9] He gave them both life sentences.

They appealed. Newcombe's sentence was reduced to 15 years but Simmonds' appeal was rejected. His life sentence stood and, in the 1960s, 'life' meant an indeterminate, even arbitrary, number of years.

In June 1960, they were transferred to Grafton, where inmates included the inimitable Darcy Dugan.[10] Having listened constantly to the radio to keep up with the latest news while on the run, Newcombe found it strange making do with no radio or newspapers. In 1964, a new inmate told Newcombe that 'the Beatles' were coming to Australia, but he didn't know who or what 'the Beatles' was.

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Simmonds went downhill. He became acutely depressed and stopped caring about his fitness and health. On 3 November 1966, the day he heard he wasn't going to be transferred to a minimum-security prison, he hanged himself. Detective Sergeant Dahl told the coroner it was 'the most determined' suicide effort he had known.[11] Simmonds was 30 years old.

Authorities put out the story that Simmonds was depressed that his parents hadn't visited, but Newcombe knew better:

'He just couldn't face the prospect of spending the rest of his time being humiliated and abused by men who acted like animals, and a system of punishment far beyond the average person's imagination.'[12]

After seven years and four months, in September 1970 Les Newcombe was released into a changing world. Ironically, the job organised for him was driving a crane, but he couldn't stand being stuck in a steel box for eight hours a day.