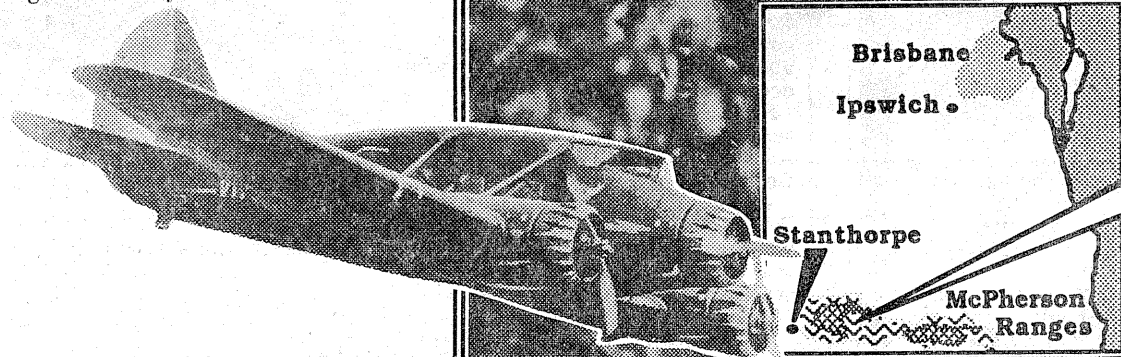


THE HERO



Bushman Bernard O'Reilly trekked through 35km of jungle to rescue the two survivors of the Stinson Tri-star aircraft (below) after it crashed in the McPherson Ranges in February 1937.



One of the original rescue party, Jim Hall, stands in the rainforest near where the aircraft went down. Picture by PHIL BLENKINSOP

Miracle of the Stinson

In 1937, a lone bushman became the hero of a nation when he discovered the survivors of an air crash in the rugged McPherson Ranges. Now a television feature will pay tribute to one of Australia's most remarkable rescues

By BERWYN LEWIS

IT'S a place where, it seems, an excess of beauty has been bestowed. It's as though nature, in a caprice of generosity, takes extra care with everything — mountain ranges, waterfalls, misty rainforests, ferns, orchids, crimson rosellas, satin bower-birds, down to the tiniest bit of tree fungus and moss. But it seems nature also exacts a price.

There is just such a feeling at Lamington National Park in south Queensland. There, on February 19 1937, an Airlines of Australia Stinson Tri-star with eight people on board, on a scheduled flight from Brisbane to Sydney, flew into the tail of a cyclone and slammed into the McPherson Ranges.

Immediately, the area became the focus of one of the most intensive aerial searches in Australia's aviation history, involving military and virtually every civilian aircraft on the east coast.

The wreckage, however, lay surrounded by 32,376ha of unbroken, trackless rainforest, and the thick undergrowth of the McPhersons, hidden from view among the vast gorges and trees growing so closely that their tops interlace in one continuous sunless canopy.

After one week the search was called off, but a local bushman, farmer and guest-house owner, Bernard O'Reilly, had his own theory. Armed with a map, some meagre rations and a pair of binoc-

ulars, he set off in search of the wreckage. Using his bush instinct and logic, he located the crash site 11 days after the plane had gone down, thus succeeding where modern technology had failed.

Within hours he had organised nearly 100 men who cut a swathe through the forest and undergrowth and carried out the two survivors — one of whom had a broken leg infected with gangrene — on stretchers.

This legendary tale of heroism and courage is the subject of a tele-feature, *The Riddle Of The Stinson*, to be screened nationally on Channel 10 on July 25 and starring Jack Thompson as Bernard O'Reilly.

It is the story of the spirit and ingenuity of the bush people who survive without the help of science and technology and who co-exist with nature and the forces rampant in rainforests.

For the Stinson pilot, Captain Rex Boyden, a "war bird", the routine flight from Brisbane was a nightmare. As he flew blind over ranges wrapped in cloud, his aircraft was flung into the down-draught of the cyclone. With his engines straining through wind speeds of more than 160km/h, he banked to starboard — and into the tall trees. To this day there is metal embedded in one of them, 18.2m from the ground.

Within seconds, the fuel tanks burst into flame. Three passengers escaped: John Proud smashed a window, dropped to the ground and, despite a fractured leg, helped Joe Binstead through the narrow opening. Binstead, in turn, helped out Jim Westray, a young Englishman.

The terrible wait for death or rescue had begun.

The ordeal ended on March 1 when, after climbing through 35km of virtually unexplored bush, O'Reilly found Binstead and Proud (now Sir John Proud, head of Peko Wallsend).

In his book *Green Mountains and Culleenbong* (published by Fortitude Press), O'Reilly wrote about his first reaction:

"God in Heaven! What was this? A numbness shot through my limbs, a sort of coldness that was worse than fear and worse than pain or shock, but was a combination of all three. 'My God!' I thought, 'I'm too late to save you'."

O'Reilly looked down on a mass of smashed, charred metal where the two survivors had huddled. "You poor bastards," he said.

Proud, with his broken leg green, swollen and maggoty, had survived a hell; Binstead, his clothing torn from crawling over rocks to bring water, extended a hand like raw meat.

"Come down here, mate," said one of the men. "We want to shake hands with you."

"What's the score?" asked the other man, referring to the fifth and deciding cricket Test between Australia and England.

O'Reilly told them that Don Bradman was 165 not out.

Leaving them with the few bits of food and whatever comfort he could offer, O'Reilly prepared to race for help, saying, "I'll bring a doctor and a hundred men."

"You won't forget about us, will you?" asked Binstead.

These words fuelled O'Reilly's rescue dash. At first he followed the grim trail left by Westray, who had valiantly set out in search of help: a piece of torn clothing here, a shoe there. Pushing against time and exhaustion, O'Reilly rushed across dangerous country, skirting cliffs — loose rock covered in the deceptively secure-looking bird's nest ferns — perpendicular drops and a waterfall lined with the treacherous giant *Helmholtzia* lilies that give the impression of providing safe footholds.

A mass of torn lilies at the bottom of a 9.5m drop told the story:

"I expected to find him lying on the broken blue rocks at the foot of that drop but found instead that he had gone on, crawling down that torrent bed with his green, slimy boulders, around more waterfalls. I followed with my heart in my throat."

As there was my man just ahead, sitting with his back against a big boulder. 'Hullo,' I shouted. 'Hoy there.' He didn't move. I came round the front of the rock. There was no need of a second look. The Englishman was dead. Westray, who had suffered shocking injuries from his fall, had died as he sat beside the river, with a lit cigarette between his fingers.

Driven by emotion and shock, O'Reilly called upon superhuman reserves of energy as he bounded, rock-hopped and slithered through an obstacle course on his way back as night fell.

"It is like a dream now, that wild run... I was quite mad, my heart had been wrung out with horror and with pity. I knew that I was sobbing... I was given strength to complete the task," he wrote.

About 8pm, O'Reilly found help — 16-year-old Roy Buchanan from Lamington, who was out shooting flying foxes on a remote timber track.

"I've found that missing aeroplane. And there are two men still alive," O'Reilly gasped.

The news fanned horrified wonder at how two men with such terrible injuries and still alive after 11 days without food, shelter or medical attention could be saved.

Today, this story is retold and retold: by O'Reilly's daughter, Rhelma Kenny, who holds slide nights about the Stinson legend at O'Reilly's Lamington National Park Guest House; by Roy Buchanan, now in his 60s; and by Jim Hall from Kyogle in NSW, who was involved in the rescue party and was just 21 at the time.

Also part of the rescue effort was Roy's father, John Buchanan. Roy Buchanan remembers how his father called for help and men from Beaudesert and as far away as Casino and Kyogle arrived. John Buchanan was to lead one of the rescue teams; their job was to cut a track up the backbone of the ranges to the wreck as they went along. This was the track the stretchers would be carried over.

THE SURVIVORS



Rescuers attend to Joe Binstead. After 11 days amid the wreckage and jungle, the first question to O'Reilly was: What was the Test cricket score?



His leg broken, John Proud shows the effects of his ordeal. Now Sir John Proud, head of Peko Wallsend, he was carried out of the almost-impenetrable jungle on a stretcher.

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