



Hurdcott Camp

Henri – the French Orphan

Timothy 'Tim' William Tovell (1878 - August 1966) was an Australian airman in World War I who, with the help of his brother Edward 'Ed' Tovell, smuggled a young French orphan out of France and to Australia.

Tovell was born in England and was apprenticed to a builder in 1898. He then became a cabinet maker and did much work for the London gentry. He was married in 1911 to Gertrude, and they then emigrated to Australia to help him recover from a 'bad chest'. The couple moved to Jandowae near Dalby in Queensland. In 1916 both Tim and his brother Ed enlisted in the Australian Flying Corps. They were posted to Belgium, and after the war to Bickendorf, Germany as part of the occupying force.

On Christmas Day 1918 a small orphan came begging for food from the Australians at Bickendorf (Germany). The orphan, whose name was probably Honore Hermene (later known as Henri Hermene and other variations), took a liking to Tim, and Tim took a liking to Henri. The orphan knew neither his age nor where he came from, other than his father was killed in the first week of the war and his mother shortly after when the Germans shelled his house, leading to the death of his mother and sister. The boy was rescued by an officer of the British artillery who looked after Henri until the officer too was killed, and Henri wounded.

Henri was treated in a military hospital and eventually discharged where he found his way back to the front lines and again attached himself to a British unit. This unit eventually ended up at Bickendorf and Henri met the Tovell brothers. The Australian doctor who saw Henri estimated his age at nine. The Australian squadron adopted Henri as their 'mascot', and fed and clothed him. He was given a uniform and made an acting corporal. He was known by the airmen as *Little Digger*.

In 1919 Tim Tovell discovered that his own son, Timmy, had died from influenza in Australia, and he decided to 'adopt' Henri and take him back to Dalby.

Tim, with the assistance of his brother, smuggled Henri out of France to England (in an oat sack) and then from England to Australia. The smuggling required considerable foresight and help from both Australian officers and men. To land Henri in Australia required permits, and Queensland premier Tom Ryan, who was travelling back to Australia on the same troop ship, heard about the effort that the airmen and Tovell brothers had gone to get him on board the ship, and arranged landing papers for Henri. The Australian press got hold of the story of the French orphan boy, and on landing Henri was mobbed by well-wishers and the curious. One

woman offered Tim Tovell £1,500 to let her look after Henri, as she had lost her son in the war. The Tovell brothers declined the offer, and took Henri to Dalby, where he went to school.



Tim Tovell with orphan Henri in France



Tim Tovell & Henri showing how they smuggled Henri to England in an Oat sack



“The Young Digger” Henri with the Tovell Brothers, Tim & Ted



Henri boxing at Hurdcott Camp, Wiltshire (Photo from A.W.M.)

Henri attempted to become an Australian citizen, but the French Embassy would not support him doing so until he was 21, and as he could not prove his age he had great difficulty in enlisting in the Australian airforce as he had wished. In 1928 Henri was killed in a motorcycle accident in Melbourne.



Henri with his adoptive father Tim Tovell about to start his training at the R.A.A.F. as an aeroplane mechanic

After being demobbed (discharged from the military) in 1919, Tim became a builder and lived in Brisbane until his death in 1966 at the age of eighty-eight. He was survived by his three children - Nancy, Edith and Edward - as well as his wife Gertrude (who died at age 94).

(Wikipedia – information only not photos)

Newspaper Report

FRENCH ORPHAN

SMUGGLED TO AUSTRALIA

“LIVED FOR DAYS IN A BAG”

An extraordinary story of the smuggling of an eleven-year-old French lad many thousands of miles from Germany to Brisbane, was unfolded when the troop train drew into Central Station.

Leaning out of the window of a carriage was a bright-faced youngster who had waved his hand and shouted to the gathering of cheering relatives on the platform. He was Henri Hermeme, a French orphan. In charge of him was Air-mechanic Tovell, of the 4th Flying Squadron, who enlisted at Toowoomba. Before he enlisted he was a builder and undertaker at Jondowae, Dalby.

Little Henri shook hands with the "Daily Mail" representative, and said, "Will you see me a little later; I will tell you the story of my life; I'm told it is very interesting."

A couple of minutes later he was seated in a motor-car, and between Air Mechanic Tovell and his brother who belongs to the same unit, was driven to Kangaroo Point Hospital. While seated at tea he attracted the attention of the Governor, Sir Hamilton Goold-Adams. "Who is the boy?" asked the Governor. When told that he was a French orphan, and that he had been wounded in the line in France, the Governor said, "That's wonderful. I hope he will be well looked after, and I wish him the best of luck."

Thought It Was Lille – "I don't know where I was born," said Henri, "but I suppose it was Lille, from what I have been told. My father was killed early in the war – during the first week – and my mother a short while later. I don't know a lot about my past, but I had no brothers or sisters. I know I am glad to be here. The Aussies have been very kind to me all through, and I never want to leave their country."

The Christmas Dinner – "Henry came to us on Christmas Day last," explained Air Mechanic Tovell, "in very amusing circumstance. We were near the German city of Cologne at the time, and the lads of the squadron decided to spend the day in style. We arranged a really capital Christmas day dinner. There was poultry, roast beef, and pudding. It was served by German waiters, and the dinner was eaten to the strains of a German band, who played quite voluntarily, "God Save the King" and "Rule Britannia". I have photographs of the band and the waiters. Well, while the dinner was at its height little Henri came into the hut from the English lines. He said the smell of the poultry made him desert the English troops. He did not want to do so, but he liked the smell of poultry. Having lived on beef and biscuits for years a lad of his age was a bag of bones. The lads jumped at the chance of making the lad happy, and he had his best dinner since childhood. From that time onwards he was never away from the Squadron, and we officially transferred him from the "Tommies". He had been with the Royal Field Artillery and an English Flying Squadron.

Blown Into A Ditch – "how they came to get him was this way: During the retreat from Mons he was placed in a motor car and driven away, but a shell wrecked the car and he was blown into a ditch. An English Officer adopted the lad and made him the mascot of the regiment. He remained with the English artillery until the middle of 1916, when he was wounded in the line near Ypres. The majority of the gun company to whom he was attached was killed. Henri was wounded in the knee. After he had been treated in hospital he was taken back by the artillery, but four days after joining up again he was blown up, and the officer who had adopted him was killed. He then joined the English Flying Corps, and during the advance that was made in 1917 he was taken through the district where his father used to own a brewery. Enquiries were made by the English troops, but the brewery, his father, and all his friends had disappeared. He then joined us in Christmas Day at Cologne, as I have described.

"In a Sack" – "On February 27 last the squadron left Cologne for England. We got Henry as far as Le Havre, but the difficulty then arose of finding means to get him to England, We thought of all sorts of schemes, and finally decided to place him in a sack branded 'oats'. He was placed aboard the steamer Lorina, and landed at Southampton. Tied up in that sack he lay on the wharf for hours, but never moved. As an Australian officer said at the time, "He displayed all the qualities which saved his race from extermination at Verdun." At Hurdcott Camp in England he was a great favorite with the men of the 4th Division.

"In a Basket" – "All went well till the day came for us to embark for Australia. We had no excuse for having an oat bag on the ship – the Kaiser-I-Hind- and for a time we were in queer street. There were all sorts of bets made among the men as to whether we would land him on the transport, and those who bet the squadron could do it won their wagers. We got a large basket and branded it 'Sporting Materials'. We fitted him into the basket and got him aboard. At the top of the gangway the embarkation officer asked, "What's in that basket?" An Australian officer replied. "Only boxing gloves." The basket was passed by the embarkation officer and stowed below. Three days after the ship sailed the lad was produced to the amazement of the majority of the troops.

Commander and the Lad – "When the commander of the ship passed him, on deck he used to look up at the sky as if searching for hostile air craft. The commanding officer, Colonel Watt, of Sydney, a wonderfully brilliant flier, said nothing severe about our smuggling trick, and the Premier, Mr Ryan, was good enough to dispatch a wireless message to Queensland arranging for the lad to land. He often used so chat with the lad, and told him he would do all he could for him in Queensland. Henri was the pet of the ship, but was not spoiled. Every night he said his prayers. He is a lovely lad, and will do well. I am adopting him."

Met Queen of Roumania – The lad talked with pride of Anzac Da in London, when he marched in the procession, of his presentation in London to the Queen of Roumania and other notabilities. "I did not meet Billy Hughes," he said, "but I was too afraid."

Travelling through from Wallagarra yesterday on the train, a young lady serving luncheon asked, "Can you use a knife and fork?" Henry was shocked, and replied, "Use a knife and fork! I can use a rifle."

He is dressed in A.I.F. uniform, wears a wound strip on his left cuff, and looks a very lad. He was adopted in Cologne by Air Mechanic Tovell the day his son died in Queensland, but at the time he had not received the sad news.

(Cairns Post, Queensland – Friday 25 July, 1919)

Permission was obtained for Henri to immigrate and he was adopted by Tovell and his wife. Henri could not be naturalized until he turned twenty-one years of age and he could not join the RAAF while he remained a French citizen. However, the Air Force engaged him as a civilian apprentice at Point Cook pending his naturalization.

Seven months before the date of his majority Henri died as a result of injuries sustained when his motor bike and a taxi collided outside the Windsor Hotel on the night of May 23, 1928. The Argus newspaper recorded that Henri was accorded "a semi-official" funeral on the 25th.

No volley was fired nor was the Last Post sounded, because Henri was not formally a member of the Air Force. However, his coffin was draped with the colours of the Australian Flying Corps, uniformed airmen were his pall-bearers and his coffin was conveyed to Fawkner Cemetery on an RAAF wagon and trailer. Nine former members of 4 Squadron and the Secretary of the Air Board attended, but the speed with which the funeral was arranged did not allow the family to travel from Queensland to be present.

The Squadron members decided that a memorial was required and with the assistance of a public appeal through The Argus an impressive sandstone monument was erected in 1932. It was topped by a statuette of a boy dressed as Henri had been dressed when he came to the Squadron in 1918. The family was not made aware of this and learned of it six weeks after the event.

During the 1950's the statuette was stolen and the grave vandalized. The Tovell family repaired the damage to the grave but the cost of replacing the statuette was beyond them. Subsequently, the sandstone monument deteriorated and the ground subsided, so that the monument leaned. The condition of the sandstone was such that restoration was impractical.

The Air Force Association Victoria received a number of approaches to repair the grave decided that a new, modest memorial would be appropriate. The Association and the Department of Veterans' Affairs jointly funded a new kerb and ledger, the inscription on which was approved by Henri's surviving sister and includes words which his father had wanted on the original grave.

On Sunday, 29 November, 2009 Digger's grave was re-dedicated in a service.

(Air Force Association Victoria)

Newspaper Report

WAR MASCOT'S DEATH

ROMANCE OF FRENCH ORPHAN

SMUGGLED TO AUSTRALIA

Carried Aboard in a Basket of Bread

Fatal injuries received in a motoring accident yesterday morning have closed the romantic career of Henri Hemene Tovell, a French orphan who was adopted by the Fourth Squadron of the Australian Flying Corps (now the Royal Australian Air Force) on active service. After suffering cruelly in the war – and few Australians have any conception of the terrible privations which befell the French and Belgian peasantry while the battle raged all round them – Henri was “adopted” by the kindly “diggers” in the Fourth Squadron, and was actually “smuggled” by them from France to England, and eventually on a troopship to Australia. The “diggers” called Henri their mascot, and so great was the bond of affection between the soldiers and the homeless peasant boy that the men pitted their wits against those of the vigilant police and other officials, and succeeded in keeping him in their care. At the time of his death Henri's age was only 18 years, although the official records at Point Cooke, where he was employed at the flying station as a mechanic, gave it as 20 years, his “official” 21st birthday falling on Christmas Day of this year.

There is more than a touch of pathos about the life story of Henri Tovell, as related yesterday by his guardian. Losing his parents in the early months of the war, the boy wandered about France from unit to unit. Twice he was wounded, but each time he returned to the lines and joined a new section. Finally he was “adopted” by the Fourth Squadron. Police officials made several attempts to prevent the boy leaving, but whenever necessary he was smuggled away, once being stowed among bags of official records, and once in a sack of loaves of bread.

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Henri Tovell's history, as Air Force men know it, commences in January of 1915 at the small French town of Seclin. The boy was then aged five years, and he lived with his mother, sisters, and his brother. His father was a French soldier in the front line. One week early in that year the father came home on leave, but the happiness of the reunited family was short-lived. A bombardment by a German heavy artillery unit began, and Henri, who had been playing in the street, hurried to his home to find that those whom he loved were dead. The house had been destroyed. Homeless, Henri wandered from Seclin miles away until he was taken and cared for by a French howitzer battery. Three months later the boy was wounded and admitted to hospital. After discharge he wandered away again, and then joined a field artillery brigade. He was wounded a second time. On recovering he found his way to the Royal Flying Corps. The boy went from unit to unit, until the middle of 1917, when he "joined" the Fourth Squadron of the Australian Flying Corps. He remained with that squadron until he reached Australia. The most interesting part of his life was that between 1917 and his arrival in Australia in June, 1919.

Avoiding the Gendarmes

With the Fourth Squadron the boy was in Cologne for three months, later going through Germany, France and Belgium, and spending some time at the demobilisation camp at Le Havre. In April, 1919, the Squadron left Le Havre for Southampton, and then the trouble with the gendarmes began. They knew that the boy was being taken away under cover, and they did their best to prevent his leaving France. The boy had become so attached to the men of the squadron that both he and they were determined that he should go. Accordingly, he was hidden among bags of official records, and in one of the bags he was smuggled on board ship. He arrived safely at Southampton, and went to the Hurdcott camp at Salisbury Plains. At Hurdcott the squadron subscribed about £60 for the boy, and at the suggestion of the commanding officer (Major Ellis) he was dressed in the uniform of the Australian Flying Corps. Although aged only nine years, Henri proudly wore two wound stripes.

The next difficulty was faced when the squadron left for Australia. The English civilian police and the military police acting in conjunction with the gendarmes again attempted to prevent the boy going with the Australians, and elaborate precautions were taken. It is said that Major Ellis wagered £25 that the boy would leave for Australia and the bet was "taken" by a sporting regimental transport officer on the understanding that if Henri once reached an allotted cabin on the transport ship he would be allowed to leave England.

Hidden Among Loaves

On the day of departure interest centred in "Young Digger", as the little French boy was known. Military police and special officers examined everything taken on board the troopship Kaiser-I-Hind. There was a large pile of bags containing bread for the trip, and it was in one of these bags that "Digger" was hidden. Cottage loaves were packed into the sack, the boy went next, with loaves wedged around him, and with three tiers above his head. The bag was stitched up and the remainder left to luck. Anxiety was felt when each sack of loaves was thoroughly examined, but the all-important sack came late in line, when the special officers had become a little lax. Several loaves were taken from Henri's bag, but he was not discovered. Soon he was standing in his miniature Australian uniform in Major Ellis's cabin. The regimental transport officer was told that the boy was

safely on board, and he frankly paid over the £25, and allowed the boy to take passage in the ship. The 1,500 “diggers” on the Kaiser-I-Hind quickly got to know him.

That was not the end, however, for on the following day the captain of the ship recognised the boy as he walked along one of the decks, and he made arrangements to have him arrested. The late Mr. T. J. Ryan, a former Premier of Queensland, who was a passenger, and Colonel Oswald Watt, the O.C. Troops, paid the fine for the stowaway, and finally ensured the boy’s departure. The present Minister for Defence (Sir William Glasgow) and Sir John Gellibrand, M.H.R., were on board the Kaiser-I-Hind.

In Australia Henri went to a suburb of Brisbane with Mr. T. Tovell, a member of the squadron, and lived with him as foster son for 18 months. At the end of 1920 the boy, then aged about 11 years, came to Melbourne and lived with friends at Gardenvale until he could be employed at Point Cook. He became a mechanic with the Royal Australian Air Force, and was there at the time of his death.

Tovell will be given a semi-official funeral this afternoon. The cortège will leave Moor Street, Fitzroy, at 2 o’clock, arriving at the Fawkner cemetery before half-past 2 o’clock.

(*The Argus*, Melbourne, Victoria – Friday 25 May, 1928)

Newspaper Item

Personal Column

“Eta” writes of the French War orphan Henri Hermene Tovell, who was adopted by the A.I.F., and was killed recently in a motor car and motor cycle collision in Melbourne at the age of 18, as follows:- I knew him well. I was so sorry to hear of his death. He was a plucky little fellow, for that is all he was, when stationed at the camp where I was a canteen worker. He was very fond of playing “two-up” with the “boys,” and would run round to us to get his pennies changed into silver before his ‘guardian,’ whom we knew as “Peter,” caught him. One day I recall seeing Hendri’s woeful face peeping round the door of his hut, and when asked what was the matter, he replied that “Peter” had taken away his nether garments to stop him playing at the two-up school. I do not know if the same “guardian” adopted him in Australia. I must say he knew and loved his job. I felt I could not let his death pass without some comment. We all loved and admired him, from canteen girls to officers, and am sure all old members of No. 11 Hurdcott, Salisbury, will be grieved to hear of his sudden death.

(*The Mercury*, Hobart, Tasmania – Wednesday 30 May, 1928)



Henri Tovell's grave before it was vandalised at Fawkner Cemetery



Henri Tovells' headstone was replaced & re-dedicated on 29th November, 2009



The headstone on display at 4 Squadron, RAAF Williamtown NSW, is inscribed with the following words:

*To the memory of
Henri Heremene Tovell,
A nameless war orphan
adopted by No 4 Squadron
Australian Flying Corps
in France during the Great
War 1914-1918 taking the name
of his self appointed guardian
Air Mechanic T.W. Tovell
of Brisbane. He returned to
Australia with the Squadron
and lived with his guardian
until 1923 when Flying Officer
H.A. Wilson assumed
responsibility for his welfare.
Accidentally killed at
Melbourne, 24 May 1928,
aged about 21 years.*
