
CHAPTER 59 - I CALL AUSTRALIA HOME

Stan Blackford

Extracted from *“One Hell of a Life: An Anglo-Indian Wallah’s Memoir from the Last Decades of the Raj”* by Captain Stan Blackford.

I reported to Fort William at Calcutta, showed my discharge authorisation, surrendered my pistol and ammunition and was issued with a discharge certificate. In this way I became 'lost' as far as the Indian Army was concerned, but called every day on the British Army Repatriation section asking for passage to Australia.

My social life had ground to a halt. Apart from the Leicesters, I had no more friends to call on; they had all gone to England or Australia. The few Anglo-Indian girls left in Calcutta were monopolised by American and British servicemen who had more money to spend than local lads – and most of these girls entertained the hope that some serviceman might marry them and 'repatriate' them to England or America as war-brides!

I was delighted, therefore, when my Aunt (by marriage) Olive Duncan wrote and suggested that I call on her young sister, Sheila Roberts, who was employed as a governess with a Mr and Mrs Harley in an exclusive suburb of Calcutta. A liveried servant showed me into an elegant drawing room, where I was received by an aristocratic-looking, silver-haired lady who asked me my name and business. I was attired as a Captain of the Indian Army. This tended to blur arbitrary class distinctions; or rather it posited me on the side of the upper crust, and she felt it her bounden duty to protect an apparently lonely and vulnerable British officer from the machinations of an Anglo-Indian nanny, fair and attractive though she may be, but nevertheless below the class to which we belonged.

'Captain Blackford,' she said in cultured tones when I had introduced myself. 'What a coincidence! My maiden name is Blackford. What is your father's name, and what part of England do you come from?'

When I told her my background, she exclaimed, 'Why, you must be Edward's son. Then I am your Aunt Dolly – Dolly Harvey.' ¹

'And How is Edward keeping these days?' she continued. 'He had such a promising career ahead of him in the civil service. What a shame it was that he broke ranks and married that terrible Anglo-Indian girl from one of the railway colonies.' Her disgust at miscegenation over-rode her sense of tact and polite behaviour! ²

I was so obsessed with getting to Australia as soon as possible, that I ignored other options, such as travelling via England. There was only one ship, the *Asturias*, catering for the thousands of servicemen and their families going direct from India to Australia, and it was taking one month for each return trip. On the other hand, three or four troopships were leaving Bombay for England each week. Had I gone to the UK, I could have secured an immediate passage from there to any Commonwealth country for only £10. I could have visited relatives in England, seen a bit of the country and arrived in Australia sooner instead of cooling my heels in Calcutta for some months without any occupation or income!

I spotted a small advertisement in the Personal column of *The Statesman*. Anyone wishing to migrate to Australia, it stated, should contact a Mr Chas P Smith MBE, expatriate Australian and former Assistant Postmaster General of Burma, who could arrange employment and accommodation in Australia, and sometimes a passage also.

I met the charming old gentleman in his room at the Grand Hotel. He perused my references from school and from the two firms I had worked for prior to joining the Army, and asked me numerous questions about my experience. Finally he made his pronouncement: Adelaide in South Australia offered the best opportunities for a fine upstanding man of my 'talents and qualifications'. I hadn't realised hitherto that I had any special marketable talents and qualifications, but I graciously acknowledged his high estimate of my many sterling qualities, accepted his advice on settling in Adelaide and paid a fee of Rs50.

He told me to call and see him two or three times each week as he had many contacts in the shipping business and was well placed to find me a berth on a vessel going to Australia. He explained that extra cabins had been added to many cargo vessels during the war to accommodate the naval ratings who manned the guns that had been fitted, and that these were now available for passengers.

'These ships are not licensed by the Board of Trade to carry passengers,' he continued, 'so the Captain may sign you on as a clerk and sign you off at the first Australian port of call. You won't have to do any work!'

The next time I saw him he asked, 'Now where are you going to in Australia?'

'Adelaide,' I said.

'What on earth do you want to go to Adelaide for?' he objected. 'For a man with your qualifications, Sydney is the obvious place to settle!'

'But you told me to go to Adelaide,' I blurted out.

'O, did I? Let me look at your file again.' He thumbed through his papers. 'O yes, yes.' He humphed and hawed as he turned several pages over. Surely he couldn't have amassed such a large file on me after one short chat!

'Ah,' he said at last. 'Yes, I have it here. Yes, with your *particular* qualifications, Adelaide is definitely the best place for you to settle. There are great new developments taking place in South Australia which require people with your particular expertise.' I was glad to learn that I had particular expertise, and that it was in demand in Adelaide.

Mahatma Gandhi was cut down by an assassin's bullet on 30 January 1948. Inter-communal tension increased, murder and mayhem stalked the land and Europeans were more anxious than ever to leave the country. Anglo-Indian men were in an unenviable position. They manned the police and communication systems to maintain order, they ran the railways that were evacuating the British, and they went to work each day leaving their wives and families at home without protection, and not knowing whether or not they would live to return home, or whether they would find their families alive and unharmed.

They knew full well that the Indians hated them, that Indians saw them as lackeys of the British who had helped their Imperial masters to hold the country in subjugation. Now they were helping to evacuate their masters and protectors to safety, but they, themselves, had no place where they could seek asylum. They were being thrown to the wolves.

I was an asylum seeker with nowhere to run to.

'I've got good news for you,' Mr Smith told me one day towards the end of February. 'Come back straightaway with Rs1000 and I'll give you a letter to a ship's captain who will take you to Fremantle. He's holding the berth for you until this evening.'

I rushed to the bank, drew out Rs1000 and returned to my benefactor. He gave me a letter to take immediately to the Captain of the Norwegian freighter MV *Elisabeth Bakke*, and told me to call back the following day when he would give me letters regarding employment and accommodation in Adelaide. I gained the impression that he would have spent no great time or effort in trying to contact me (domestic telephones were rare at the time); that he would have given the berth to whomsoever of his numerous clients happened to call next. It was my good fortune that I visited him at that particular time.

I reported to the captain within the hour. The following day I called again on Mr Smith and received copies of correspondence he had allegedly written on my behalf: a letter to the Catholic Archbishop of Adelaide asking him to arrange accommodation for me, and letters to the South Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, to Actil Ltd and to General Motors Holden.

Charles P Smith certainly knew how to write a powerful letter. All these missives praised me in glowing terms and paid tribute to my character and industriousness, and left no doubt in the minds of would-be recipients that I would be a commercial asset of inestimable value to the firm that was fortunate enough to secure my services – but such abundant praise from a man who really knew nothing about my background other than what I had told him! His pen had, no doubt, been dipped in the literary equivalent of the Blarney Stone.³

Three days later, on the evening of 29 February 1948, the *Elisabeth Bakke* sailed down the Hooghly River with the outgoing tide, carrying eight clients of the helpful Mr

Smith. Apart from myself there were Bill and Mildred Smith with their twenty-one year-old daughter Joyce (no relatives of Chas P); a Mrs Kelly with her children Peter and Rosemary, twelve and ten respectively; and an Anglo-Indian just discharged from the British Army, Noel E Carlisle-Watson. The consensus of opinion was that Chas P Smith was a confidence man, but we didn't mind being conned as we had all obtained passages, albeit at black-market prices, from sources that were not known or available to the general public. Chas P had provided us with a very much needed service, and we were grateful.

My first glimpse of Australia was early one morning as the *Elisabeth Bakke* sailed up the Swan River and berthed at Fremantle. The drabness of the wharfs with their long iron sheds and gantries and cranes did nothing to diminish my excitement. We all wanted to continue our journeys post haste to our final destinations: the Smiths and I to Adelaide, the Kellys to Melbourne and Carlisle-Watson to Sydney.

The ship's agent came aboard as soon as the ship had docked and informed us that normally 'foreign bottoms' were not allowed to carry passengers on Australian coastal routes but, due to an acute shortage of travel accommodation, the *Elisabeth Bakke* had been granted a special licence to carry us from Fremantle to Devonport in Tasmania, and thence to Melbourne, its final destination. We eight immediately paid our fares to Melbourne.

The ship was to stay exactly seven days in Fremantle before sailing again, and we thought we'd use the ship as a floating hotel during our short stay. We were soon disabused of that notion, however. Regulations did not permit passengers to live aboard 'foreign bottoms' unless they were 'through passengers'. We claimed to be through passengers: from Calcutta, through Fremantle and through Devonport to Melbourne. No, our original journey apparently had ended on arrival at Fremantle. The new journey would not start for another seven days and *No*, we could not live aboard this foreign bottom till the sailing date!

By eleven in the morning we eight immigrants had been cleared by Customs and were free to leave. 'But' said the ship's agent, 'I don't know where you will find a place to stay tonight.' This sounded ominous. Australia was suffering from war time shortages, the officer explained, and accommodation was scarce. The Smiths had

been met by relatives and thus had been offered a roof over their heads, but five of us had to find shelter by that evening.

'Well, in that case we won't hang around,' we declared, 'we'll travel to the Eastern States by rail. Will you please refund the passage moneys we have just paid?'

'You have to book at least two weeks ahead for train travel,' the agent told us.

'What about ships?'

A few ships apparently carried interstate passengers, but they also were booked out well in advance, and air travel was not yet in vogue.

'Well, what about hotels?' we asked. 'Or boarding houses?'

'Nope,' said the man. 'They are all over-crowded, and things are much worse just now as country people have flocked into Perth for the Show.'

'The Show?' Never having heard of a 'Show', we were none the wiser even after he had told us about the Royal Perth Agricultural Show. He soon convinced us that beds for visitors were impossible to find.

'This is an emergency,' we wailed. 'Can't we stay on the ship until we find accommodation?'

'No,' said the Captain.

'Just for one night? Please, one night only.'

'Nope,' said the agent. 'Regulations forbid it. Better get yourselves a taxi and start searching.'

Five of us crammed into a taxi at eleven in the morning, and by four in the afternoon we were still driving around, calling on hotels and guest houses. The weather was warm. We were hot and thirsty and tired, and despaired of finding beds for the night. The Salvation Army and the YMCA and the YWCA hostels were crowded out.

Mrs Kelly was hysterical and in tears. 'Take me to a Catholic priest,' she wept. The taxi took us to the cathedral and Mrs Kelly went into the sacristy wiping the tears from her eyes.

Half an hour later Mrs Kelly and a priest came out smiling. 'Take Mrs Kelly and the girl to the Maylands Hotel,' he instructed the driver. 'And I've booked the three gentlemen into Pauline Guilfoyle's Hotel Australia.'

'Oh,' he added, almost as an afterthought, 'I didn't know your names, so I have booked you all in under the name of Kelly!'

After dropping Mrs Kelly and Rosemary off at Maylands, we three males booked in at the Hotel Australia in Perth. We gave our real names, but the receptionist insisted that the bookings were for three Kellys, so we had to register as Kelly, Kelly and Kelly. We were ushered into a large room into which six beds and one dressing table had been crammed; no room for a chair. Three beds each had an occupant sitting on it, smoking, reading newspapers and idly chatting. We were introduced to them as Mr Kelly, Mr Kelly and Mr Kelly. And the same introductions were made as we seated ourselves at a large table for breakfast the following morning.

Each day after breakfast the three of us would catch the electric train out to Maylands, and return to the city with Mrs Kelly and Rosemary. The Hotel Australia was always crammed with people, either about to go to the showgrounds or just returned from there. A holiday, almost festive, atmosphere prevailed.

We five made it our headquarters too, spending much time sitting in the over crowded lounge and lobby, and venturing out occasionally to the movies or to Luna Park. The staff took great delight in introducing us to all and sundry as Mrs Kelly, Mr Kelly, Mr Kelly, Mr Kelly and Rosemary. The real Kellys were very fair, and the children were rotund in shape like their father, of whom we had caught a glimpse as we waved our friends and relatives goodbye at the Kidderpore Docks in Calcutta. The rest of our small party were slim. As to complexion, I am khaki-ish and Carlyle-Watson was very dark. The other patrons of the hotel were intrigued with us as a group and were obviously trying to work out our relationship. Finally one old woman couldn't contain her curiosity any longer. She sidled up to Mrs Kelly and remarked, 'My word, Mrs Kelly, your three sons are very different in appearance, aren't they?'

Quick as a flash she retorted, 'Yes. I've been married three times.'

I was struck by the cleanliness of the streets and the shops of Perth after what I had experienced in the Indian sub-continent and in Iraq. And the neat rows of houses:

they looked like doll's houses after the palatial mansions of India. The picturesque gardens and parks, though neat and tidy, were not as large and numerous, nor as colourful as the ones in India where we had teams of *malis* to tend them. The hotels and restaurants bore no comparison with the luxury establishments we knew in India, and the best cinemas here were more like the dingy country picture theatres of Indian country towns. Shops, especially the department stores, were bright and cheery looking, and we were overwhelmed by the array of goods on sale. I had never seen an escalator before and I rode on them for the slightest pretence.

I was thrilled by the quantity and quality of confectionery available. I could not remember how many months, or years, it had been since I had last tasted chocolate. Here the shops seemed to be overflowing with chocolates: Nestles, Cadbury and MacRobertson. And milkshakes! The last milkshake I had tasted was in Calcutta and had cost the equivalent of four Australian shillings, with two shillings extra for malt. Calcutta, the second city of the British Empire, had only two milk bars, and the next nearest milk bar was in New Delhi 1500 kilometres away.

Australia seemed to have a milk bar round every corner, stacked with chocolates and lollies, and milkshakes cost only four pence, with ha'pence extra for malt. During my first two days in Perth I ordered three milkshakes at a time and stood at the counter and drank them in one continuous guzzle. (During my first six months in Australia I put on four stone in weight, and had to receive three lots of clothing coupons from the rationing authority to keep myself clothed).

Most of my week at Perth was spent at Lunar Park, and similarly at Devonport, Tasmania, where the ship stayed four days. At Melbourne I booked into a hotel for a week of sightseeing, then caught the overnight train to Adelaide, arriving here on April Fool's Day 1948. I didn't know that money could disappear as rapidly as it had over the previous three weeks.

At Adelaide I was referred to a boarding house run by a delightful English couple, Mum and Pa Blunt, at 40 North Terrace, Kent Town. They provided board and lodging for eight young men, all just out of the forces, and this was my home for twelve months. Bill had been a corporal in the British Army in India before the War. He immediately conscripted all his lodgers into the British Imperial Sub-Branch of the

RSL⁴ in Tynte Street, North Adelaide, and every Friday night he marched his contingent to the clubrooms for our weekly booze-up and games of indoor bowls.

The cost of migrating from Calcutta to Adelaide had cost me a small fortune. The RSL Secretary informed me that I was entitled to claim reimbursement of travel expenses on discharge from the Army and put me in touch with the Department of Veteran Affairs. On the latter's advice I wrote to the FCMA⁵ in Poona and claimed the cost of a first class sea passage from Calcutta to Adelaide.

The FCMA replied promptly, querying how a regular officer of the Indian Army had managed to land up in Adelaide without authorised travel documents, and instructed me to return to India forthwith to face a Court of Enquiry to determine whether or not I should be court martialled for desertion. It informed me further that I had been demoted from captain adjutant to lieutenant, that the demotion had been backdated many months, and that the difference in pay had been debited to my account; and would I please repay it promptly? Meanwhile it was freezing some thousands of rupees of my deferred pay, together with discharge pay and gratuities, pending the outcome of the Court of Enquiry and the possible Court Martial.

I stopped corresponding with the FCMA – and I never claimed my service medals in case the Army traced me and had me extradited to India on a charge of desertion.

The Department of Veterans Affairs said that it would refund me the cost of a first-class train fare from Perth to Adelaide only. But first I had to fill in a form giving details of my arrival and stay in Perth. I did this, and some weeks later I received a letter stating that the DVA had verified my arrival by MV *Elisabeth Bakke* in Fremantle, my subsequent travel to Melbourne via Devonport, my stay in Melbourne and subsequent arrival in Adelaide.

But, it stated, there was no record of a Captain S T Blackford's having stayed at the Hotel Australia in Perth during the dates given; would I please explain?

I explained to a DVA officer that I had booked into the hotel as Captain Kelly. And why had I assumed the name of Kelly? the man wanted to know. As I told him about the fiasco his face grew more and more puzzled and incredulous. 'Put your explanation in writing,' he said.

Not being a man of letters, I found this a daunting and painstaking task. But eventually I dispatched a long missive to the DVA, and for my trouble I received a cheque in the post for £17.

Thus was severed my last link with India and the Indian Army.

I now called Australia home.

ENDNOTES

1. The Harveys had a factory in Calcutta and they profited immensely from supplying tarpaulins and rubber sheets to the war machine.
2. 'Breaking ranks' or 'letting the side down' was common parlance for describing a union where one of 'our class' had married into a family that was known to have a 'touch of the tarbrush'. It highlighted also a heart-breaking fact that the children of many large Anglo-Indian families were often most dissimilar in colouring, because of the strange propensities that genes have for combining in diverse manners to produce a variety of differing characteristics among siblings. Thus dark children, explained as 'throw-backs', often appeared along with fair ones in many families even when both parents were fair, and was a source of acute embarrassment to the fair-skinned members of the family. It was not unknown during the last century and a half of British rule in India for fair-skinned Anglo-Indian families at retirement to 'go home' to an England which they had never seen, taking only their fair children and leaving the dark ones behind with relatives or friends, or even to fend for themselves, to conceal the fact that their blood line was 'tainted'. Such was the force of colour bias among the British in pre-independence India.
3. When I arrived in Adelaide and called on the recipients of these laudatory epistles, I discovered that none of them had ever heard of Charles P Smith M.B.E., nor recalled receiving letters from anybody in the previous few weeks concerning an army officer arriving from India needing accommodation and employment. I am now certain that he never posted the originals!
4. The Returned Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen's League, commonly referred to as the RSL.
5. FCMA: Field Controller of Military Accounts who handled all our pay and allowances.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Stan Blackford is an Anglo-Indian who was born in and grew up in India. After spending time in the Army in India during the Second World War he moved to Adelaide Australia where he has lived since 1948.