

### **BROCKMAN John (Son of Robert James Brockman)**

The following is an article published in the Daily News, Tuesday, June 26, 1934 titled "*Epic Story of Suffering and Heroism - John Brockman's Great Struggle for Life - Companion's Death From Thirst*"

"In simple, yet thrilling terms, there is told in the diary of the late Mr John Brockman, a story of intense suffering and of heroism when he and a man named Lowe engaged in an exploratory trip in the Gascoyne country towards the end of 1881. Mr Lowe forfeited his life through thirst and exhaustion. Mr Brockman experienced fearful trials but these did not deter him, after he had been given succour, from again endangering his life in the effort to rescue his companion.

It is a record of pluck and endurance perhaps almost unequalled in the many records of the grandly brave deeds of heroism by Australian bushmen. The efforts of the explorer to find his lost companion; his subsequent wonderful struggles for life; the heroism of his conduct in returning, notwithstanding the wretched state he was in after his protracted sufferings, show such pluck and gallantry as to place him high in the list of intrepid and brave bushmen in the annals of Western Australian exploration.

Mr John Brockman was born in Western Australia, and he was among the pioneers of the North-West. He was interested in opening up new pastoral country as also were his brothers Charles and Julius. For a considerable time he held the position of Resident Magistrate at Roebourne.

Mr Lowe had come from Omeo, in Victoria, and desired to take up new country to the north-east of Minilya station, which was then owned by Mr Julius Brockman. It was there that he started on his ill-fated journey in the company of the man who recorded the particulars in his diary.

Mr John Brockman lived to the age of 86 and he died at Applecross a little over four years ago. His story follows:-

- Saturday, November 11, 1881 - I started in company with Mr Lowe, a gentleman from Gippsland, Victoria, to explore a track of country north-east of the Gascoyne. We track with three horses and three weeks' provisions. Travelled that day about 28 miles and reached a well where we expected to find water, but found it quite dry, so camped without water.
- November 12 - Started again very early without breakfast, for the Minilya River, distant about 25 miles. About 3 pm. Mr Lowe's horse knocked up and leaving the pack stowed away in some bushes, he mounted the pack horse and we pushed on to the river, distant nine miles, where we expect to find a good supply of water. Reached the river at sunset and after searching for two hours after dark without success we camped. Intending to go up the river as soon as the sun rose. Our horses as well as ourselves were now completely done up. We had all been 48 hours without water and had travelled over 70 miles.
- November 13 - The moon rose at 2 am. Calling Mr Lowe we started on foot up the river, taking the gun and our bridles. Saw the horses tracks going up the river in the sandy bed. We walked on for about three miles without seeing any signs of water; nothing but dry, loose sand, into which we sank over our ankles at every step. At last Mr Lowe sank down completely exhausted. I felt sure that our only chance lay in pushing up the river, so, after a great deal of persuasion and repeated stoppages, I succeeded in getting him by sunrise about ten miles from where we camped. Here we both lay down in the shade, in great misery and as the day went on, it became intensely hot which added greatly to our suffering.

## **All Alone**

About noon Mr Lowe's knocked-up horse overtook us, going up the river like ourselves in search of water, and we agreed to catch the horse for one to ride him as far as he would go then push on, on foot, to the water, returning to the other with water in our bags. I gave Mr. Lowe the choice of going on or remaining, and he said "You'd better go, as you are more likely to find water than I am." I accordingly put my bridle on upon the horse, and was about to mount, when he suddenly caught the bridle, saying, "no, I can't give up my horse, I'll go myself." I then gave him a water bag and he started on the horse at a walk. I followed in his tracks for about a mile, and being unable to proceed any farther, lay down in the shade in great suffering.

I had then been three days constantly on the move, without food or water, and the weather was dreadfully warm. At dark I suddenly made up my mind to search down river instead of up, thinking it possible that I might find water below where we struck the river the night before, in some of the large clay-pans; so leaving my gun, boots, coat and inner shirt, I started to retrace my steps. I was so weak, however, that I could only walk a few hundred yards at a time. I now took off my remaining shirt and carried it over my arm and, as the night wore on it became cooler, I seemed to gain strength.

## **Prayed For Death**

November 14 - At about 2 am. I was completely exhausted, and, being unable to go another step, I lay down under a bush. I had now given up all hope, and prayed for death to end my dreadful sufferings - such sufferings as no one who has not experienced them can imagine, and on one can describe. My tongue was as swollen that it seemed to fill my mouth, and my throat seemed to be closed up. I breathed with great difficulty. Just before daybreak I suddenly heard the cry of a pack of dogs not far off, and though in a half-unconscious state, it immediately roused me, as I knew it to be a sure sign of water. After a night's hunting, dogs always go to water and, after drinking, they give a sort of farewell howl before turning in for the day. I staggered along somehow in the direction of the sound, one idea alone filling my mind - water, while mocking voices seemed to speak to me from every tree and bush that I passed. Light and memory suddenly dawned upon me at the sight of a heap of mud with about an inch of water on top.

## **Water At Last**

At the far end of the large clay pan that I entered three dogs had just drunk, and had made an accommodating hole in the mud into which I fell rather than stooped. Oh! the delight of that draught of muddy water, which I afterwards, however, found to be very much like Epsom salts with a dash of salt in it. I had no taste then - it was water, and therefore all that could be desired. It brought me back to life, and my memory returned. I bethought me of my poor companion. I feared the worst for him and considered in my mind how I could help him. This water I could see would only last another day, so I went off to another clay pan, about half a mile off, that I could make out from a clump of blue gum trees growing on its banks. Here I found to my great delight a much larger supply of beautiful fresh water, after a long pull at which I felt quite strong and at once determined to go to the pack, distant nine miles, to get the canvas water bag to take to the relief of Mr Lowe.

Though I had not tasted a morsel of food for nearly five days, I stepped on quite briskly in my bare feet over the rough ground. Reached the pack about midday and busily packing a little flour, tea, sugar and my revolver, I started again for the water, but I found that I had over-rated my strength, and it was late in the afternoon when I again reached the flat in which the water was. The day had been dreadfully hot, and my feet were now in a terrible state, so blistered and full of thorns, that I could hardly get along, and, missing the water. I wandered

about all through the night in search of it. I threw everything away except the water bag, pannikin and revolver. I was now almost as badly in want of water as before.

### **Foodless For A Week**

November 15 - Once more giving up all hope, just before daylight I lay down to await the death which seemed inevitable, and again I heard the welcome cry of the dogs very near me. I was quite unable to walk now, and, proceeding on my knees about 200 yards, I reached the same pool which I had left the previous morning, then full of hope of being able to go to the relief of my companion as soon as I could get the water bag. Now, of course, that was out of the question, and my thoughts turned naturally to my own chances of life. I had now been without food for about a week. I had fortunately kept my revolver, and about midday nine emu came to the water, one of which I shot, and cutting the flesh into strips, put it in the sun to dry. I remained there living on the dried meat until the 21st, having to crawl on my hands and knees for food and water. I had made up my mind that as soon as my feet got round I would get through to the station on foot, and there get horses and return in search of Mr Lowe. The water was now all but dry, and though my feet were still very tender, there was nothing for it but to remain and perish, or make a start for the station, a distance of 60 miles, to a rough country destitute of water.

November 21 - This evening I accordingly started, with many misgivings, but not without hope. I will not dwell upon the terrible sufferings of that journey, performed without food or water, and bare feet, but will content myself with merely stating that I reached the "Dip Station", six miles from home, on the morning of the fourth day, more dead than alive. Had the well been a mile further I could not have reached it. I found my friend Mr Bunbury here, and he lost no time in ministering to my wants and making me as comfortable as possible. He then went after some horses, intending to himself go in search of Mr Lowe, and returned home late in the afternoon. I had then so far recovered that I made up my mind to return myself, thinking that I should have a better chance of finding him, as I knew exactly where to pick up his tracks.

November 26 - This morning I started again, taking a native with me, who knew the country. We were both well mounted, and by 9 o'clock that evening we had reached Yalobia Well, where we found plenty of fresh water. I was so weak that after watering and hobbling the horses I was unable to get any supper, so I wrapped myself in my rug and lay down till daylight.

November 27 - Started again, after an early breakfast and by 5 pm. reached a clay pan with a little water, about three miles from my former camp. I left the native here to collect wood, and boil the pannikin, and taking both horses, I went for the pack saddle and bags that Mr Lowe and I had left on our way out, as all our provisions was now in them, we having brought about two day's rations with us. It was on after dark when I got back to camp, and after supper I turned into bed feeling quite ill.

November 28 - Feeling very ill and weak, we did not make a start until late in the afternoon, when we moved on to another water hole on a large grassy flat, where we found and caught one of the horses I had lost on my first trip.

November 29 - Placed the pack on the fresh horse and started for the river which we struck purposely about three miles above where I had last seen Mr Lowe. Here we found the tracks on foot, which proved that the horse could not have carried him far. We followed the tracks all through the dreadful heat of that long day, but with great difficulty, as they kept going into the long grass growing on the river banks; and in the river it was equally difficult tracking, as, the sand being dry and loose, all tracks are quickly obliterated by the stormy SW. breezes which blows every day.

At last we were completely at fault and after hours of fruitless search we camped at dark at a shallow well in the bed of the river. Here we found an old native man and old women and

borrowed one of their large scoops to water our horses out of. They had not seen anything of a white man or his tracks but explained that they had come down the river from Coolkilya Pool only a few days before.

November 30 -After another long and further search, during which we suffered a good deal of heat and want of water, I started in the afternoon on horseback for Coolkilya Pool - where the old native said there was a large campment of natives - with the intention (as a further attempt to track was useless) of getting them to come down and have a thorough search in every clump and thicket, and in that long grass lining the river banks

### **Magic In A Name**

When within about two miles of the pool, and as we were riding along the north bank of the river, my native suddenly halted and pointed out to me about 25 natives all armed with spears creeping along the bed of the river, about 130 yards from us. By my order, the native shouted to them to come up, that I was their friend; but as they did not have a desired effect he then on his own accord shouted to them that I was "Charlie Brockman", when about a dozen of them came up at once, carrying their spears and killies.

Some of them who had seen my brother, found when they came close to me that my native had not told the truth; they were however, quite reassured when he told them I was his brother and also their friend. By this time a lot more had come up, numbering in all, about 30 young men, all armed. Without giving me a chance to ask them a question about the matter I had in mind, they \_\_\_\_\_ my ears a long list of grievances, all of which I was requested to take notice in reporting to their friend, "Charlie Brockman".

### **Blacks Grievances**

They stated that some time before, Mountain, a big white man and two other white men, had come down with seven horses and taken away by force, about 20 of the young men and boys and all those who were any trouble, had a slipknot put around their necks and were choked until they submitted. (This part of their statement they illustrated by placing a small line round my horse's neck, putting it around their own, and imitating a person choking).

After promising to do all I could for them I explained to them through my native what had brought me there and that I wished them to assist me, promising them all the flour and sugar that I had, except enough to carry me home, if they found the white man. They agreed to start early next morning, and, as it was then about sunset, they led the way to their camp at Coolkilya Pool and I followed. Here I found altogether 45 natives exclusive of children. Hobbled out my horses and camped on the bed of the river about 200 yards from the natives.

### **Lowe's Remains Found**

December 1 - Started early this morning with 38 natives, which number, however, soon dwindled down to nine young men. With these I reached the sand well at our old camp, by 9 am., and after watering the horses and having a pannikin of tea and a hasty meal, we all dispersed in different directions to search every bush and clump of long grass for my missing friend's remains, for I had now given up hope of ever seeing him alive again. Until now I had a faint hope that I might find him with these natives, who, I think, would have looked after him had they fallen in with him.

About 4 pm., one of the old women I mentioned, having seen me on the way up, came to tell me that she had found my friend on the opposite side of the river under a gum tree. I went across, taking all the natives with me, and there, lying on his side as if he had fallen gently asleep, the poor fellow was. He had taken off his clothes and placed them under his head for a pillow. He must have died in the afternoon, as he was lying on the side of the tree where the shade would be in the morning.

With a heavy heart I committed the remains of my late companion and friend to their lonely grave in the bush, and returned to the camp, where I divided all my flour and sugar among the natives who had assisted in the search, keeping only sufficient to carry me home. Started at sunset the same day, travelled about ten miles down the river, and camped without water.

December 2 - Although the horses were hobbled up in grass up to their knees, they strayed during the night and gave us a six mile walk after them, so that it was late when I reached my old camp down the river. Felt an attack of bad eyes coming on.

December 3 - Started very early and reached Yalobia Well, where we camped. My eyes were now so bad that I could hardly see.

#### **HOME AND NEARLY BLIND**

December 4 - made an early start, and on the morning of the 5th reached home, almost blind. There I found my brother and Mr Johnston, who had been looking anxiously for my return for some days. In any ordinary season I should have had no difficulty in finding water, but to the northward this had been an exceptionally dry one, as some of the pools, which in ordinary seasons contained water during the whole year, are now perfectly dry. From the appearance of the country no rain has fallen since last January, when I believe the river was flooded.

PS. - Since writing the above Captain Walcott has arrived here on official duty in the schooner Myra, and I have made a full report to him of the statement made to me by the natives on Minilya River, as to the kidnapping of their friends by Mountain, and I believe he intends taking immediate steps in this matter. - **J.B.**