

THE BOLD LINE

Bridget Mahony's father was an Australian Traveller who loved the open road. He drew on the map every route he took as a truck driver until his premature death. To continue a bond with this much-missed man, his daughter decided to take a trip of her own, to fill in the blanks. Words and photographs by **Bridget Mahony**



***I**t was a bitterly cold Sunday in July. The time: just 5am. With an all-encompassing sense of anticipation, she removed her bags from the boot of the car and carried them inside the terminal. Who was Edward John Mahony and why was his daughter standing at Hobart Airport with 20kg of luggage and 17,000km on her mind?*

“Ted” (to everyone who knew him) was rather an ingenious man, honest with a generous spirit and an engaging sense of humour. Born in 1946 in Latrobe, a small town on the north-west coast of Tasmania, he spent his younger years in the Central Highlands towns of Bronte Park and Poatina, where his father worked on the Hydro. It was here that his love of the outdoors and transport began. At age five he emerged without so much as a graze after crashing his little red pedal car: it had picked up too much speed on a downhill run and twisted a wheel.

He could drive a real car by the time he turned seven and knew enough about mechanics to remove the spark plugs, though not quite enough to return them to their correct position.

In later years Ted had a family of his own; to support them he worked as a truck driver transporting goods in Tasmania. His job took him interstate as a contracted owner/driver when the need for more regular work increased.

So who was Edward John Mahony? He was a son, a brother, a husband and a friend. He was also a father – my father.

I only ever remember Dad working in the transport industry. While it was hard work in remote areas of Australia and certainly difficult at times, he loved it. He appreciated the landscapes, enjoyed time with the characters he met and delighted in their recounted stories, which he would share each night over the phone.

At the age of 11, I travelled with him from our home town in Devonport as far north as Brisbane. Sailing out of the heads on the *Abel*

En route to Mt Bruce in Karijini National Park, WA.
INSETS: Ted Mahoney and the map of both his and daughter Bridget's journeys.

Tasman, it was clear that Dad was proud to be able to give me an insight into his life on the road.

We were gone for a couple of weeks. I slept in the bunk at the back of the cab while Dad rigged up another that folded out over the top of the passenger's seat. There was many a night when I would wake as we hit a pothole, or crossed onto an unsealed section of highway, to see Dad with his eyes fixed firmly on the road. The broken white lines passed under, illuminated in the headlights. He drove on and I would drift back to sleep, the music playing softly in the background interrupted only by the intermittent crackle of the radio.

Ten years later and in a devastating fashion, it was this line of work that served to remind everyone of the risks.

On July 22, 2003, my father was travelling south on the Newell Highway, bound for Melbourne. At 10.20pm that evening he rounded a bend near the town of Moree. In that same moment, two trucks – one travelling in front of him and another travelling north, collided. Together they were out of control and left Dad with nowhere to go. He died instantly.

Eight years on I am here, standing at the airport, more aware than ever of the significance of the map wedged between my laptop and the notebook in my backpack. Dad's aim was to see as much of Australia through his work as he could. So much so that, given the choice, he took the job that sent him in a direction he had never been, on roads he had never driven.

The map I refer to had for years hung on a wall at home; each time he returned from a trip, he would trace the line of any new roads while I looked on with admiration.

I'd had this image in my mind for years now, and consequently it had become my aim to complete it: to join the bold lines he'd drawn and travel to those parts of Australia he so longed to see.

This was the journey that was about to begin; part one of The Bold Line, 17,000km in seven weeks, visiting more than 70 towns, mostly by road. I was to set off from Alice Springs.

As the plane flew over Lake Eyre and commenced its descent into Central Australia, what lay ahead began to unfold before my eyes.

Wanting to start the journey somewhere significant, I was fortunate enough to get a lift out to the Road Transport Hall of Fame. It was exactly what I'd hoped for, a mix of new and old and so-old-the-rust-had-set-in. While there, someone asked me where I was headed. "Adelaide," I said.

"Oh," the person replied, appearing a little less interested, "Back down the Stuart Highway then?"



Karlu Karlu or Devils Marbles, off the Stuart Highway 390km north of Alice Springs.

"No," I answered, "I'm going the other way." The next morning it was time to hit the road. Leaving town before the sun came up, I was planning to retrace the only stretch of road on my journey that Dad had travelled before, the Stuart Highway between Alice Springs and Daly Waters.

The Stuart Highway was relentless. Sitting up front alongside the driver, I realised I would be exceptionally ineffective as a navigator. The road regularly disappeared

I thought of Dad's frustration in the days of cassettes, when the gravel roads would shake the tape loose

behind the curtain of my eyelids and my head would begin to nod.

But the surrounding "nothing" was certainly something, and as the day wore on and the sun intensified, so did the colours of the landscape. This natural beauty had my undivided attention for what remained of the day's drive.

Two days later, as we were approaching Daly Waters, I felt a sense of impending loss when I realised my father had never got to see the road from here on in.

Continuing north, the landscape gained

height and took on a slightly more tropical feel. The occasional fire burned along the roadside and powerful road trains cast us in shadow as they barrelled past, their displaced air giving us a shove.

On reaching Darwin, I hired a car and made my way to Litchfield and then Kakadu National Parks. At one point, a dingo darted out in front of me, doubling back as if to taunt, and the radio began to crackle into oblivion. I knew I couldn't risk a moment's inattention, so I stopped to buy a CD. Smiling to myself, I thought back to Dad's frustration in the days of cassettes, when the gravel roads would shake the tape loose and another *Best of Australian Country* album was laid to rest in a roadhouse bin.

That evening, after watching the sunset from Ubirr Rock in Kakadu, I drove back towards the main road at dusk, conscious of wildlife and trying to ignore the smell of bushfire smoke and the orange glow visible through the trees.

Back in Darwin, I joined a tour group to see me through the Kimberley. Knowing that time constraints rarely allowed Dad to venture far from the quickest route to his destination, it was going to be a privilege to see and do so much in the days ahead.

At Timber Creek on our second night, we sat around the campfire and shared the stories that had brought each of us to this incredible



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Water lily, Yellow Water, Kakadu. Ute near Wauchope. Cape Leveque. Cable Beach. El Questro resort.

part of the country. It was humbling that Dad's story resonated with many, bringing tears to the eyes of some listeners.

In the days that followed the road offered up so much. Jabirus flew alongside, bulls fought on dusty tracks, brumbies grazed at the road's edge and our time on the Gibb River Road kept us entertained with corrugations that shook us senseless, river crossings, onboard antics and a whole lot of dust.

A few nights later, around another campfire on the banks of the Pentecost River, a voice broke through the evening chatter. In song we were delivered a captivating rendition, accompanied by guitar, of John Williamson's ballad, *The Trucker's Wife*. The fire flickered, silence ensued and an unexpected tear escaped.

As the last of the Gibb River Road disappeared into the distance, we were well on our way to Broome. With the temperature still in the high 30s I had stretched myself out across two seats, my head resting on a pillow against the window and the air conditioning working overtime. In this comfortable state, I tried to imagine what driving in temperatures far greater than this would have been like for Dad. With just a fan running from the cigarette lighter and a vent in the roof, it is no wonder he once found refuge in the empty refrigerated container he was carting – what a convenient load in the heat.

Excited to be arriving in Broome, and into a town with a population greater than my local suburb, I was also looking forward to seeing two of Dad's closest friends, who by sheer chance were in town for two different events. Arriving in sweltering heat, I set up camp and met the group out on Cable Beach to capture the evening's spectacular sunset.

Dad had thousands of photos himself, all taken on disposable cameras. Occasionally, as you'd flick through his albums, one would turn up with a sepia effect – usually his truck in a commanding position before a view like none other I'd seen. Not a known function of this type of camera, the sepia effect was achieved when Dad placed his sunglasses over the lens!

The feeling of freedom that being on the road brings returned as we headed out of Broome, but so too did the sense of isolation. In Port Hedland, we stopped for some supplies and a member of our group said hello to a passing local. The lady asked him where he was from.

"Victoria," he replied.

"Oh, I have family near there," she said.

"Really," he said. "Where?"

"Queensland," she replied.

The following day we did get somewhat closer to Queensland, having travelled three-and-a-half hours inland to Karijini National Park. But at the base of the third stage of the

group's ascent up one mountain I had to admit defeat, giving in to my fear of heights.

For the next three hours I waited alone on a ridge as the wind howled around me. From here I could see for miles: the Marandoo mine site was off to one side, while riven and ravaged mountain ranges extended in the other direction. I could do little more than sit and think.

I remembered the days when I'd sat (much more comfortably) talking with my 97-year-old grandfather. He, too, had now passed away, but only three months earlier. He knew so much about this journey, and back then we spoke often. As my preparations progressed he would share fond memories of his son, his recollections always so precise and vivid. At times his eyes would well, and he'd shake his head to avert the intruding emotion. I made pages of barely legible notes – an invaluable reference to me now.

Taking out my notebook, I read a few pages and in that moment these few lines rang true:

"He often commented on the loneliness of the road. Sometimes he would just pull the truck over – he'd be in the middle of nowhere – turn off the engine, step outside and just listen. Such wide open spaces, such silence."

And right then I knew that feeling too: not a person in sight, not a sound to be heard – and me, no more than an insignificant speck in a scene so vast, so confronting.

Camping out for the next two nights and liberated of phone reception (and able to fully appreciate it, knowing there was a satellite phone somewhere on board), I spread Dad's map out on a picnic table to share with the others. One man spoke of a group of truck drivers he saw each year at an event in Victoria. After trying to recall names and dates we concluded that this group was one that Dad had formed; he'd been part of this same annual event.

As we continued south, I faced what was to be my longest stretch on the road, albeit as a grateful passenger. After 721km of chatting, reading, staring out the window and nodding off, I woke to an inland ocean, or so I thought. It turned out to be a vast expanse of low-lying shrubs on extremely flat terrain.

Thankfully we were almost in Exmouth and there would be no other such mirages. It's no wonder truck drivers like a beer – when you arrive somewhere, you certainly feel like you

Sometimes he would pull the truck over in the middle of nowhere, turn off the engine, step outside and just listen

have achieved something worth celebrating.

On our approach to Perth later that week, I knew I was merely kilometres away from joining the bold lines between Daly Waters and this remote Western Australian capital.

Dad's niece and nephew live in Perth so my excitement was twofold. It was refreshing to spend a few days with family – even the afternoon of Tonka trucks, Lego ships and Tiny Teddy consumption with my four-year-old godson.

Before moving on I called in to see another cousin at the Fremantle Dockers. Dad had once come to the oval to watch him train. It was great to be somewhere I knew he had been before, and wonderful to share the memory with someone who could recall it.

A week later, I returned to Perth after visiting the beautiful south-west. It was Father's Day and I was headed home.

Boarding the Indian Pacific, I was bound for Adelaide to join the last bold line of this journey and to share that moment with my mum. Travelling by train across the Nullarbor, parallel to the Eyre Highway that Dad had travelled so many years before, was a symbolic way to bring to an end this incredible journey, and a fitting tribute to a devoted father. ■

If you'd like to read more about Bridget's journey, her daily trip notes can be found at www.theboldline.com.au



FROM TOP: Kookaburras, Purnululu NP. Kapok near the King Leopold Ranges. The road to Karijini NP. Cape Leveque, Dampier Peninsula.