

## THE TRUE STORY OF BRONCHO BILL

### Brigadier-General W.R. Ludlow, C.B.

Area Commandant, Ouderdom, Zillebeke, Reninghelst

*The following item has been sent in by Terry Russell of Weymouth, Dorset.*

*It comes from THE YPRES TIMES, Vol.3, No.1. Jan. 1926.*

*Henry features Broncho in Love and the Loveless, see especially. pp.148 - 151.*

Broncho Bill was an Australian outlaw from the Back Blocks. At the outbreak of war he was doing five years' penal servitude, and had completed three years of his sentence. I don't know what his offence had been, but his conduct in gaol must have been pretty good, for in September, 1914, he was released to join the Australian contingent for France.

At first all went well. The spirit of adventure was in his blood, and this was the greatest adventure he had ever been up against.

But after a time he found the discipline unendurable, and with a few choice spirits to bear him company, he one day disappeared.

He was posted as a deserter, but his batallion was in a district abounding with forests and caves, and search was hopeless.

When we had almost forgotten him, he one day paid us a visit. Breaking into some officers' quarters he stole a uniform and several subalterns' chit books.

He presented himself with these at successive Paymasters' Offices, and not only drew a monthly advance, but obtained other sums by means of advance books bearing the forged signatures of brother officers.

With the money thus obtained he entered into a wild orgy of extravagance with his boon companions. Their behaviour attracted the attention of the M.P. and the whole party were placed under arrest.

Escaping from his escort, Broncho Bill left his companions to their fate, and the prisoners' cage, and although the country was searched high and low no trace of him could be discovered.

A few days afterwards an escort of M.P., under a particularly smart sergeant, presented themselves at the cage, armed with an order for the conveyance of the prisoners for trial by court martial. Everything was in order and the prisoners were handed over and were never seen again, for that particularly smart sergeant was none other than Broncho Bill himself, who had raised for the occasion a very special force of M.P. consisting of his own pals.

Shortly afterwards mysterious fires occurred in the quarters of a certain French town, accompanied by a series of most audacious robberies.

An informer told us that it was Broncho Bill again. The A.P.M. motored to the town with a strong party of military police. A ring was made round the place and every outlet blocked. The A.P.M. remained in person to effect the capture. As he was entering the town in his car he was met by a squad of military police who saluted. The A.P.M. gravely returned the salute.

After hours of fruitless search he found to his chagrin that the squad he had seen consisted of Broncho Bill and his associates, who thus once more slipped through his fingers.

Towards the end of 1917 he turned up again with the Australian Division at the village of Neuve Eglise ready for fresh enterprises.

By means of a bribe of 50 francs he secured the use of a room and started the game of "One Up" with coins "peculiar" (as Bret Harte would say) in possessing two heads or two tails apiece. In two nights he made 700 francs. When his dupes discovered the method of his trickery and made for him, he covered them with his revolver and made good his escape with speed and the 700 francs.

A few days later the commandant of a neighbouring area rang me up on the 'phone. "I have a man sent to me as camp warden who has done five years. I want to put him in the dug outs next to you so that I can keep an eye on him." Two days later the warden had absconded only to be captured within the week. As he was being taken along the village street to the cage, an A.S.C. Corporal coming out of an estaminet was heard to say: "That's the blighter who is harbouring Australian deserters." So that was where Broncho Bill was taking refuge. I instantly rang up the M.P. and that night the dug-outs close to my headquarters were surrounded and our old friend and two other ruffians were bagged and taken to the M.P. camp on the Dickebush Road.

I must confess I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard he was in safe custody. Next morning the three prisoners were led out to the ablution bench to wash with one solitary sentry to guard them. Bill must have been touched by such child-like confidence. Watching his opportunity he knocked the sentry down, picked up the rifle and, the alarm having been raised, covered his pursuers and threatened to let the light through anyone who interfered with him.

Then began a fine hue and cry. I was at breakfast at the time and for a moment thought that the Bosche had broken through.

The three fugitives rushed past my office and rifles were cracking like a machine gun. One of the three was hit in the arm and the leg on the road to Poperinghe, and a second stuck in a muddy patch in a field and gave himself up, but Broncho Bill, who seemed to bear a charmed life, disappeared across country, and made good his escape.

This was the last we saw of him, although I have a shrewd suspicion that a man who turned up at my office when I was out, without papers or identity disc, was none other than this military Dick Turpin. This time, as far as I know, he drew a blank and departed rather hurriedly leaving his cap behind.

When I left France in 1918 he was still at large. As likely as not he had returned to the Army in another name and was using his undoubted

pluck and enterprise in the praiseworthy work of killing Germans.

I should have liked a battalion of Broncho Bills, if only I could have kept them busily employed. Between times, one was more than enough.

I have often wondered if it was Broncho Bill who stole my new riding breeches which were hanging out on the line to dry, outside my office, or who decamped with a staff officer's horse while he was delivering a message at a certain Brigade Headquarters at Dickebush. One never can tell.

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