

# A Review of Vicki Bennett's *'The Little Stowaway'*

## Heartwarming story of the littlest 'Digger' now a children's book

Kylie Lang, *The Courier-Mail* March 3, 2018 'Insight Magazine'

GOOD things can come from war. That's the message Brisbane author Vicki Bennett wants children to understand.

Amid the carnage and desolation of fighting over territory, ideology or religion, there are slivers of sunlight. They are the relationships forged and the bonds that endure.

"If you see an opportunity to help someone, never walk away," says Bennett, author of 27 books, including *The Little Stowaway*, released this week and aimed at children under 10.

"This was my father George McGregor's advice to me, but it was also the code that Tim Tovell, a World War I airman who smuggled a young French orphan to Australia, lived by."

The two men are forever entwined through the legacies they have left, with Bennett the conduit for sharing both.

It was while her father – an OAM, World War II veteran and RSL state councillor – was dying in 2012 that he gave her a precious gift of two pennies he had saved since 1919 to remind him of a great achievement.

Bennett, of Chelmer in Brisbane's west, could never have imagined how much those coins would change her life.

Honouring her father's last wish, she took the coins to the northern French village of Villers-Bretonneux and visited the school he and other Victorian children had rebuilt in 1919 by raising money, one penny at a time.

The Victoria School still stands, educating generations of students under a large banner that commands "Do Not Forget Australia". The village never has.

It was the Diggers who, in a bold counter-attack on April 24, 1918, recaptured the town, just hours after it fell to the Germans in a failed British assault.

McGregor's father, Henry, was among too few men who made it home to Australia.

Another was Tim Tovell.



*"Most of the airmen can't pronounce my name," writes Bennett, as Honore, in The Little Stowaway. Above, French child refugee Henri Tovell known as "Young Digger".*

Bennett learnt of the big-hearted airman in 2015, two years after writing a children's book called *Two Pennies* about her father's historic fundraising efforts.

"I was talking to a producer in Brisbane about doing a documentary about Dad, and he said I needed to find other stories as well," Bennett tells Insight.

"My girlfriend, Tina Mitchell, who visits nursing homes through her business, Aged Care Art, told me about a woman she had met in her mid-nineties in Gympie."

Her name was Edith Lock, and she was Tim Tovell's youngest daughter.

Through information supplied to her by Mrs Lock, and by tracking down four grandchildren of Tovell and his wife, Gertie – Sally, Marilyn, Rick and Rob Elliott – Bennett began piecing together the family's account of what must surely have been one of the most heart-rending stories of the Great War.



On Christmas Eve 1918, a starving French orphan, lured by the aroma of turkey, wanders over to the mess hall of No. 4 Squadron of the Australian Flying Corps, on the border of France and Germany.

"Digger" with Tim Tovell in France before coming back to Australia. Picture: Tim Tovell collection. Image used in the book *The Little Stowaway*

Honoré is about eight years old but doesn't know his surname. Four years earlier, his father was killed fighting in the Battle of Mons in Belgium. Within weeks, his mother and sister were blown to pieces when the Germans bombed the family home near Lille, in northern France.

Honoré, who was playing outside and witnessed the attack, left with the clothes on his back and one small bust of Napoleon, which he retrieved from the rubble.

Outside the mess hall on that snowy December night, Honoré meets Tim Tovell, a tall man with a bristling moustache who, before enlisting in 1916 at the age of 41, was a builder in Jandowae, 51km north of Dalby on Queensland's Western Downs.

Tovell welcomes the child inside, gives him a meal, and the men from No 4. Squadron find him a bed in the barracks. "Most of the airmen can't pronounce my name," writes Bennett, as Honoré, in *The Little Stowaway*. "But Tim calls me Young Digger because I'm brave like a soldier.

"One day, Tim says that rats are taking over the camp. I find a cart and some traps to help. An old grey dog runs up to me and licks my face. His name is Fella. He will be my assistant. Together, we catch the rats in the camp, and soon I am the official rat catcher for the Australian Flying Corps."

Tovell and his younger brother, Ted, teach Honoré to box, skate and read, and after the war ends in 1918, Tim writes to Gertie of his intention to adopt the child to spare him the orphanage. This will require smuggling him out of France.



*Above: "Digger" with Ted Tovell learning to box. Picture: Tim Tovell collection. Image used in the book The Little Stowaway*

"Tim squeezes me into an old oat bag ... he ties empty jam tins onto my knees and elbows to disguise my shape," Bennett writes.

"Carefully, Tim carries me over his shoulder and onto the big ship for the trip across the English Channel."

When in London, Tovell has an Australian Army uniform made for Honoré, who proudly leads Squadron 4 in the 1919 Anzac Day parade and salutes the Prince of Wales as he passes Australia House.

By June that year, the Tovell brothers and their little stowaway are train-bound for Brisbane.

"When we step from the train, I see a beautiful woman and a young girl waiting for us," writes Bennett. "They smile at me. It's Gertie, from the picture in Tim's wallet. And Nancy, my new sister."

Sadly, one person from that dog-eared family photo was absent.

"Little Timmy – Tim and Gertie's second child – died of the plague while Tim was overseas taking all these risks to smuggle Honoré home," Bennett tells Insight

"On January 31, 1919, Tim sent Gertie a letter saying 'one more in the family won't matter', and on exactly the same day, Gertie wrote to Tim from Jandowae saying they did everything they could to save Timmy.

"Their letters crossed over the Atlantic, so Honoré wasn't the child brought back to make up for Timmy. Tim squeezes me into an old oat bag ... he ties empty jam tins onto my knees and elbows to disguise my shape," as Bennett writes.

Honoré and the Tovells spent many happy years in Jandowae, then Cooroy and Kangaroo Point, where Tim lived until his death in 1966 at the age of 88.

When Honoré was about 15, he decided to emulate his adopted father and join the men of No. 4 Squadron.

He moved to Victoria and became an apprentice fitter and turner in the Royal Australian Air Force's Point Cook base, southwest of Melbourne.

"One rainy day when Honoré was about 18," Bennett says, "he was taking messages on a motorbike from Point Cook, and was coming around the corner near The Windsor Hotel in Melbourne when a taxi ran into him. Honoré died that evening."

The Tovells, who by this point had other children – Edith and Edward – never really recovered from this devastating turn of events.



*Above, March 1919, Tim Tovell with "Digger" in a smuggling sack in England*

In *The Little Stowaway*, which has original photos plus beautiful illustrations by Tull Suwannakit, Bennett doesn't touch on Honoré's life in Australia, which is probably just as well.

There is already a degree of sadness in the book, which her grandchildren, Riley, 6, and Liam, 4, have been quick to pick up on.

"They really love the book – they love that little Honoré got to see koalas and kangaroos, and they really love that he got a brand-new sister – but they were very sad that his dog, Fella, had to stay behind in France," she says.



"Digger" (can be seen in the middle) with the 4th Squadron Christmas 1918. Picture: Tim Tovell collection. Image used in the book *The Little Stowaway*

With the story of Tim Tovell and his Young Digger, Bennett had enough material to convince production company McGirvanmedia to make a documentary.

In 2015 she returned to France with husband Ian Mathieson and began filming.

Bennett says she wrote the script for and co-produced *Never Forget Australia* – which includes six moving stories and will air on SBS television at 8.30pm on April 24 – and is now midway through a script for a full-length film.

“The story of little Honoré is so powerful,” she says. “I am a pacifist and my grandsons know this because they are always trying to bring toy guns into the house, so they did ask me why I would write a book about war.

“I told them there are good things that can come from war, and relationships and new beginnings can be a very positive result of conflict.”

Vicki Bennett learned of the big-hearted airman, Tim Tovell, in 2015, two years after writing a children’s book called *Two Pennies* about her Dad’s historic fundraising efforts

[Email Kylie Lang](#)

***The Little Stowaway* is published by Scholastic, rrp \$24.99. *Never Forget Australia* is distributed by Umbrella Entertainment**



*Above, Bennett with her Little Stowaway book*

## Additional images from the Tim Tovell collection



The Tovells never really recovered from the death of "Digger" in an accident.  
*"Digger" Tovell in his RAAF uniform.*



*Digger with Ted Tovell, centre, and Tim Tovell.  
Picture: Tim Tovell collection. Image used in the book *The Little Stowaway**

**Video link here:**

<http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/heartwarming-story-of-the-littlest-digger-now-a-childrens-book/news-story/8b548da3ea4b66b6fca5391b091b0dbc>