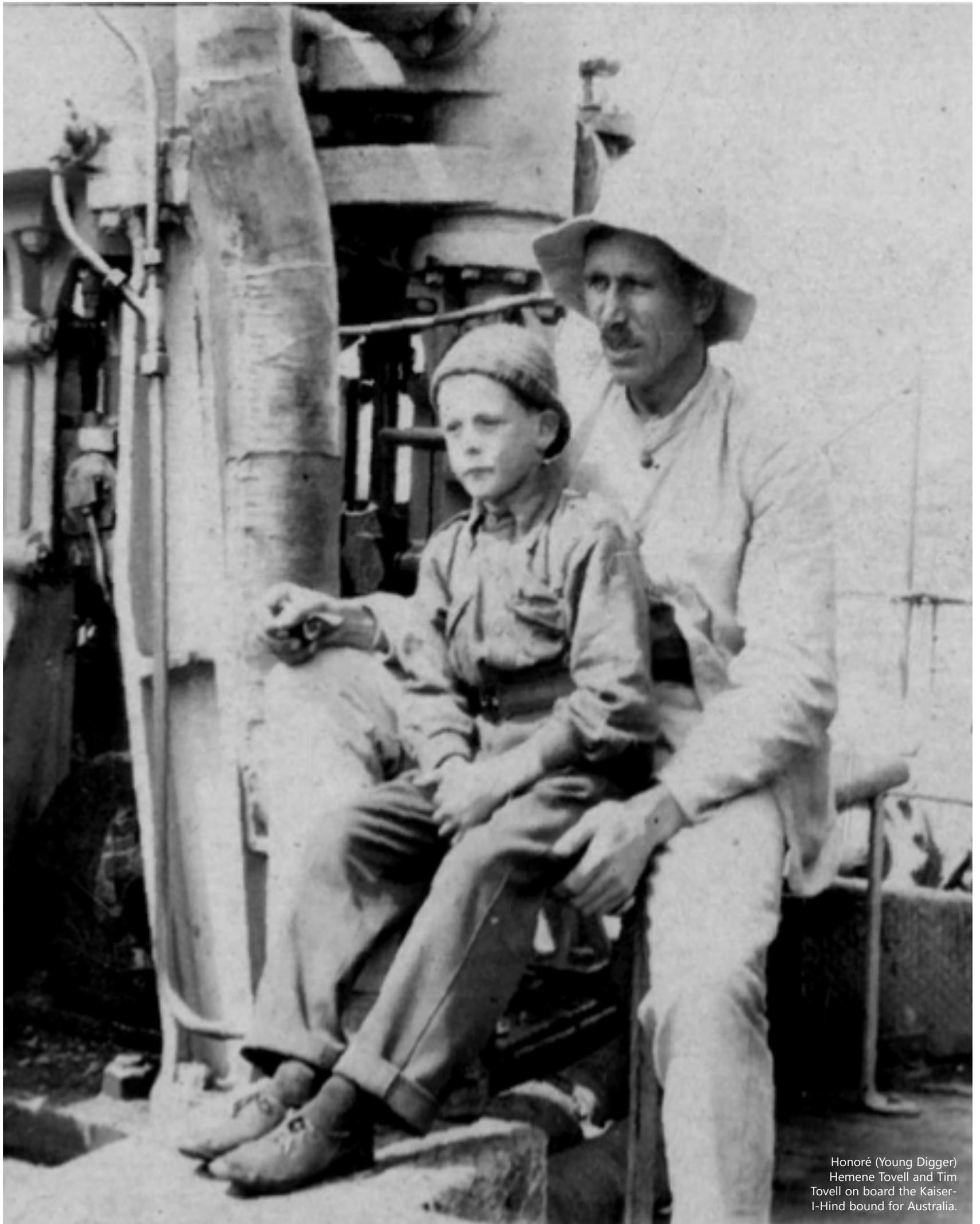


# **THE LITTLE STOWAWAY**

## **AND OTHER STORIES OF COURAGE AND COMPASSION**

Vicki Bennett has made a career of telling the little-told  
Australian stories of WWI.

 Vicki Bennett



Honoré (Young Digger)  
Hemene Tovell and Tim  
Tovell on board the Kaiser-  
I-Hind bound for Australia.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Honoré (Young Digger) Hemene Tovell and Tim Tovell and the oat bag used to smuggle Young Digger from France on board the Lorina; Young Digger in a tailor-made uniform, paid for by airmen donations; Young Digger and Ted Tovell, right, learning how to box; Young Digger learning to ice skate.

CENTRE: *The Little Stowaway* author Vicki Bennett.

Honoré (Young Digger)  
Hemene Tovell, Ted and  
Tim Tovell on ANZAC Day  
1919 in London.



**“WHEN IT WAS TIME FOR TIM TOVELL TO COME BACK TO AUSTRALIA, HE SMUGGLED YOUNG DIGGER ONTO THE SHIP FROM FRANCE TO ENGLAND IN AN OAT BAG. HIS ACTIONS LEFT A LEGACY – WHEN YOU CAN DO SOMETHING FOR SOMEONE, DO IT.”**

**NOT** far from the Western Front in 1918, a ragged, hungry little French boy, an orphan of the First World War, came out of the fog on a freezing cold Christmas night and wandered into the mess of Australian Flying Corps Number 4 Squadron. They were celebrating Christmas. The little French boy attached himself to the Squadron and became their mascot.

He was taken under the wing of Australian Air Mechanic Tim Tovell, from Queensland. The Australians couldn't pronounce his French name, Honoré, and in typical Australian style, renamed him Henri – but it was Young Digger that stuck.

When it was time for Tim to come back to Australia, he smuggled Young Digger onto the ship from France to England in an oat bag. Empty food tins were attached to his knees and feet to camouflage his silhouette in the bag.

In England, an Australian Army

uniform was made for Young Digger so he could march in the 1919 London ANZAC Day Parade.

It was supposed to be a secret, but everyone came to know about the little orphan smuggled to England in an oat sack. So, when it was time to sail to Australia, Tim put Young Digger in a large basket marked “sporting materials”, which was loaded onto the *Kaisar-i-Hind*.

When the ship sailed, everyone was sworn to secrecy about Young Digger hidden below deck, but it wasn't long before everyone knew about the little French stowaway.

With an uncertain past and an extraordinary future, *The Little Stowaway* is a story about the love between a boy and his new family in Australia. It is also about how, from war, wonderful friendships, strong attachments and an enduring bond continues to grow between Australia and France.

This story of Young Digger is now

woven into the history of Number 4 Squadron.

Tim was determined, however risky, to bring Young Digger home to Australia and provide the boy with a new family. Tim's actions left a legacy – when you can do something for someone, do it, don't look away.

Number 4 Squadron upholds his legacy every year – awarding the Tovell Shield to an airman or airwoman who exemplifies Tim's courage, loyalty, dedication, compassion and pride in the unit and the Air Force.

I wrote an illustrated children's book about Young Digger's amazing story, *The Little Stowaway*, and launched it at Number 4 Squadron base in Williamstown on March 5, 2018.

But the journey to writing this true story began with my dad, Henry George McGregor (known as George), who served his country in Borneo and Papua New Guinea during WWII. George lived out his days serving his fellow veterans – as a driving force

behind the RSL Girl in a Million Quest, which raised funds for RSL's work in the veteran community, and as a member of the original committee that created RSL Care in Queensland.

His inspiration also led me to write the children's book *Two Pennies*, and then write and co-produce a documentary, *Never Forget Australia*, which led to *The Little Stowaway*.

As a child, my father often told me about how, as a little boy just after WWI, he worked in his father's bakery to raise two pennies to help rebuild the Victoria School in Villers-Bretonneux, which had been destroyed along with most of the village.

Not long before he died in 2012, George brought out a little wooden box, took two pennies and placed them in my hand. He said, "Take these to the little school in France and give them to the headmaster." These were the last two pennies he earned during that time.

Along with the other schoolchildren at Middle Park State School, Melbourne, in early 1920, his first two pennies formed part of a shiny snake around the school. With donations from other Melbourne schoolchildren, this money rebuilt the French school after WWI. The Victoria School in Villers-Bretonneux still stands proudly today, with a banner in the central courtyard that reads: Never Forget Australia.

My dad kept these pennies for over 90 years. So, I went to the Victoria School and gave them to the headmaster, Monsieur Holleville. He was very pleased.

On my return to Australia, I decided to write the story of *Two Pennies* – how this little boy rose early to care for the horses that pulled the carts to deliver the bread. I had already written 19 books by then, but this book was close to home.

When I took *Two Pennies* to executive producer Alan McGirvan, he asked if we could turn it into a film. I immediately said "Yes" and a tingle of excitement ran up my spine. I knew I was in for a ride.

*Two Pennies* was the starting point

and anchor for the documentary *Never Forget Australia*, which discovers several amazing true stories about Australians in France in WWI. While researching this documentary, I met and interviewed Tim Tovell's grandchildren and Young Digger's nieces and nephews. They generously gave me access to their "big red suitcase", with memorabilia, photos and letters.

In the documentary, "The Little French Digger" is the first story showcased. The second, "Where Two Pennies helped to rebuild the Victoria School in France".

The third is about the *Mephisto* and how 13 Australian soldiers crossed into no man's land and returned with a German tank. A Queenslander masterminded bringing *Mephisto* back to Brisbane. One hundred years later, this tank survives as the only remaining A7V Sturmpanzerwagen in the world.

The fourth is a little-known story about "Why Villers-Bretonneux is a funny name for an Aboriginal burial ground". Downtrodden in their own country, Australian Aborigines were banned from serving in the military on the grounds of race. The offer of six shillings a day on a trip overseas was too good to miss, however, and more than 800 skirted the rules to enlist and serve their country.

The fifth story is titled "The Unknown Soldier, known only to God". A headstone in the cemetery at the Australian War Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, reads: "Known Only to God. We will never know his name, where he was born or his age, family, rank, Battalion or precisely how or when he died. We will never know who this Australian soldier was. Or 11,000 of his comrades. This is known only to God."

The sixth story, "ANZAC Day at Villers-Bretonneux" explores how the ANZACs took back the little French village on ANZAC Day, 1918 – a turning point in WWI. Now, over 5000 people make a pilgrimage to the Australian War Memorial on ANZAC

Day to honour the 46,000 Australians and 12,000 New Zealanders who remain there. This is how Villers-Bretonneux became that special little piece of Australia in the middle of France.

The final story in the documentary is about General John Monash. The French will never forget the Australian General who played such a significant role in turning the tide of WWI. Sir John Monash understood the significance of surprise and meticulous planning. He demonstrated these tactics and left an indelible mark on history. ←

**"THE VICTORIA SCHOOL IN VILLERS-BRETONNEUX STILL STANDS PROUDLY TODAY, WITH A BANNER IN THE CENTRAL COURTYARD THAT READS: NEVER FORGET AUSTRALIA."**



**WIN**

For a chance to win copies of both the *Never Forget Australia* documentary and *The Little Stowaway* book, turn to page 86.