

THE POLICE TRACKER

Stories from Sgt. Riley's Scrapbook

Police Sergeant-Tracker Alec Riley of the New South Wales Police Department is probably the outstanding example of this combined talent. A police-tracker for 35 years, Riley is the only aborigine in Australian history ever to receive the King's Medal for distinguished police service, and the first blacktracker to be promoted to the rank of sergeant.

To Riley goes the credit for tracking down the "Last of the Bushrangers," in what he considers the most difficult assignment of his police career. The "bushrangers" are the Australian equivalent of America's famous two-gun frontier outlaws.

In the frantic early days of the country, gangs of bushrangers appeared from time to time to rob, kill and terrorize the peaceful settlers, prospectors and ranchers of the back areas. Most of these were lawless white men, but some were aborigines whose association with the rowdy whites of pioneer Australia gave them the inspiration to turn bushranger. The most infamous of these dark-skinned outlaws were the Governor brothers—Jimmy and Joe—who murdered and looted their way to gory infamy before they were finally made to pay for their crimes.

When the Governor brothers "went bush" after killing a visiting trooper in the front room of their farmhouse, a third brother, Roy, was only four years old. He was still a child when the Governor Gang came to a violent end, but his ambition to follow in his brothers' footsteps was already formed. As a youth he started on this path with a series of petty thefts, pilferings and brawls. By the time he was 23, he had a lengthy record as a minor criminal when he was released from jail on parole. He decided the time was ripe for him to "go bush" as his brothers had.

He signaled this decision by stealing a rifle and horse from a farm-house and heading into the heavy timber in the Mendooran district, scene of the Governor Gang's exploits. In the ensuing months, remote ranch and farm-houses throughout the area were robbed, sheep and cattle were found dead with only choice cuts of meat sliced from the carcasses, and people in the region began to stand guard at night in fear of further raids.

Riley was one of 30 police officers and blacktrackers assigned to catch the bandit. Although no one at first knew his identity, Governor, jealous of his brothers' reputation, began to flaunt openly his crimes. On the wool of dead sheep he had rustled, he would sign in blood, "Roy Governor, the Notorious Bushranger". Similar "calling cards" were left at plundered farm-houses. With all his boastfulness, he was a clever

bushman who took pleasure in outwitting his pursuers. For months he eluded police searchers—sometimes leaving a tantalizingly plain trail, only to disappear just as they thought they had him.

Riley was on the job for three months before he discovered Governor's secret. He was searching the bush around a former campsite of the outlaw. As usual, there were no tracks leading away from the campfire—not even a tiny clue of a broken twig, a displaced pebble, or partial heelprint which is sufficient to guide an expert blacktracker. It was as though Governor had literally flown away. Riley even examined the trees around the site for telltale scratches which would have revealed that the outlaw had climbed aloft for his escape.

Then he noticed a slight peculiarity in the short tufts of grass near the deserted fire. There were no crushed places such as a heavy footprint would have made. Rather, there was a slight darkness at certain spots where the sunlight reflected differently than from the surrounding grass. Riley circled the area slowly. He experimented by carefully placing his feet on the darker tufts of grass. These slightly bruised spots recurred at intervals exactly the length of a man's stride.

Riley subjected each of the dark grass patches to a close scrutiny. In several, he found tiny curls of whitish hair. Suddenly he had the secret of Governor's amazing trackless retreats. The bushranger had tied large pieces of sheepskin about his feet—with the woolly side down. The shaggy softness of the fleece left no outline for a tracker to follow and cushioned each footprint so that it did not trample down grass as a boot would.

From that point on, it was only a matter of time before Riley got his man. Following the almost invisible smudges in dust and the ever-so-slightly bruised tufts of grass in the bush, Riley relentlessly tracked the outlaw. At length, Governor grew panicky and forced his way into bush so dense that few men could follow. In