

# Witchdoctor's Victim Brings Health to Outback

by Douglas Lockwood

Phillip Roberts, a handsome Alawa tribesman from the Roper River, is one of Australia's newest citizens, even though his ancestors were all born here.

Last year, with Sandy Willika from Katherine, he was granted full citizenship because the aboriginal authorities believe he is ready for its rights and responsibilities.

There is no doubt that he is.

In his youth Phillip was sung to death in a pagan ceremony.

He survived because he was cured by another equally primitive witchdoctor whose power was greater than that of the man who tried to kill him.

Phillip is a likeable, well educated man who works as a medical orderly at Bagot Native Hospital, near Darwin.

## Mission

His training has given him a scientific approach toward medicine.

Nevertheless, he believes that witchdoctors still exist—and not only among the aborigines.

He can see little difference between them and some of the unscrupulous white "quacks" who claim miraculous cures for incurable diseases.

Phillip was born on the Roper River. His parents called him Wadjiri-Wadjiri, but he dropped that name when he came to live in the white community.

He was brought up at Roper River mission and educated by a half-caste teacher, Margaret Blittner.

He began his adult life as a motor mechanic.

## Driver

Strange things began to happen in 1953 when a red-bearded white man, Dr. "Spike" Langsford, arrived one day on a routine medical flight.

Dr. Langsford engaged Phillip as his personal driver, mechanic, orderly and companion, and paid him well from his own funds.

Phillip has never since looked back. And he has never forgotten Dr. Langsford's help.

Phillip told me his story:

"We were in the bush together for four months. Dr. Langsford taught me how to use a microscope, how to give a hypodermic injection, and how to diagnose hookworm and other diseases which ravaged my people.

## Humans

"When I returned to Roper River mission I worked in the hospital rather than in the garage. From that day I have always been more interested in human bodies than motors. I helped the nursing sister in the mission hospital and acted as orderly."

It was while Phillip was working in the hospital that the mission was visited by Dr. Jim Tarleton Rayment, who had a portable X-ray machine.

Phillip had never seen anything like it and began asking questions.

"Dr. Rayment made me his first patient," Phillip said. "Later he took me inside a blacked-out tent while he developed the film and showed me how I looked inside my skin.

"Nothing the witchdoctor had ever done could match this. I was most impressed and I knew that henceforth I would work in the field of medicine.

"I went with him on a two months' medical survey through Arnhem Land. When we returned I knew how to operate the X-ray machine, develop film and mix photographic chemicals.

"I liked that work, I thought the X-ray machine could out-witch the witchdoctors who had once tried to take my life.

"Now I am able to diagnose all kinds of diseases, including leprosy and tuberculosis."

In 1957 Phillip went to Noumea as the only Australian student at a South Pacific Commission conference of the World Health Organisation.

## "Star"

There he was taught how to co-operate with tribal witchdoctors.

Of them, Phillip said, "In my youth I was sung to death. A witchdoctor 'sang' a toy star into my body so that it would burn me to death from inside.

"I can remember the burning sensation clearly. I was soon very ill. I would have died except for a second witchdoctor, old Gijawa, who 'sang' me until I was better.

"He made a herbal mixture from wattle bark, mixed it with wild honey, and made me drink it.

"While he was mixing the brew he sang and danced around me.

"When I had taken the mixture he put his hand over my heart and sucked some bad blood from my body.