

A Policeman's Lot...



5615
MONUMENT WAS ERECTED
BY
THE COMMAND (IN CONNECTION WITH
THE GOVERNMENT OF QUEENSLAND)
OF
ALFRED WAVELL,
A SENIOR CONSTABLE OF THE
QUEENSLAND POLICE,
WHO WAS SHOT DEAD WHILST DUTY
PERFORMING HIS DUTY ON THE
27TH OCTOBER, 1900,
AGED 37

STORY: B. CREER
PICTURES: J. SHEWAN

Late in the month of October 1889 a telegram was delivered to the Brisbane office of Queensland's Police Commissioner.

It read: *Constable Wavell was shot in the execution of his duty, endeavouring to arrest a half-caste named Joe Flick. A steady, good officer, an experienced bushman whom we will be hard to replace.*

The telegram had been sent by the officer in charge of the Burketown police post, Inspector Alexander Douglas. Its simple 33-word message marked the official end of an incident which has escaped the notice of most chronicles of the pioneering days of North Western Queensland.

Constable Alfred Wavell didn't have a particularly grand beginning to his career as a Queensland police officer. He was originally sworn-in as a Constable on 14 August 1872 and allocated the registered number of 315. Two years later he was summarily dealt with for "Boarding in a Public House". For this "offence" he was fined five shillings.

On 11 May 1874, a police Disciplinary Board dismissed Wavell from the force. The grounds for his dismissal were officially stated as: "Having married a prostitute against the advice of his superiors". Notwithstanding the seriousness of this offence, in the eyes of the senior members of the Force, Wavell was re-admitted as a Constable in 1882, given the registered number of 488, and posted to Norman River as Camp-Keeper.

The Norman River police depot was a tiny settlement which later grew to become Normanton. Wavell spent some time there before transferring to Georgetown in November 1887, following a short stint at Carl Creek. In June the following year he returned to the police depot at, what now was called, Normanton, where he served until October. On 20 October 1888, Wavell was promoted to the rank of Senior Constable and posted to Corinda, where the police barracks were located on the Nicholson River, at a place known as Turn-Off Lagoon (now the site of Doomadgee Mission).

It was with an entirely different background that young half-caste Joe Flick moved towards his fateful meeting with Constable Wavell, and a police bullet. Flick had been born at Burketown. His father, had married an aboriginal woman who raised the boy in the ways of the white man notwithstanding which Joe Flick soon developed the remarkable skills of bushcraft in which the aborigine is unexcelled. He also possessed the inherent horsemanship which established the aborigine among the finest stockmen in the world.

Joe Flick was said to have been well liked and respected by the residents of Burketown and by those who peopled the lonely cattle properties in the area. He was trustworthy and intelligent, and a good man with cattle. So much so that he was constantly in demand by property-owners in the area for mustering and droving assignments.

In these roles he was given far more responsibility than other half-caste or aboriginal stockmen. Local stories about him paint a picture of a likeable,

capable young man. How then did such a man turn renegade, a robber, a horse-thief and cattle killer—eventually a murderer?

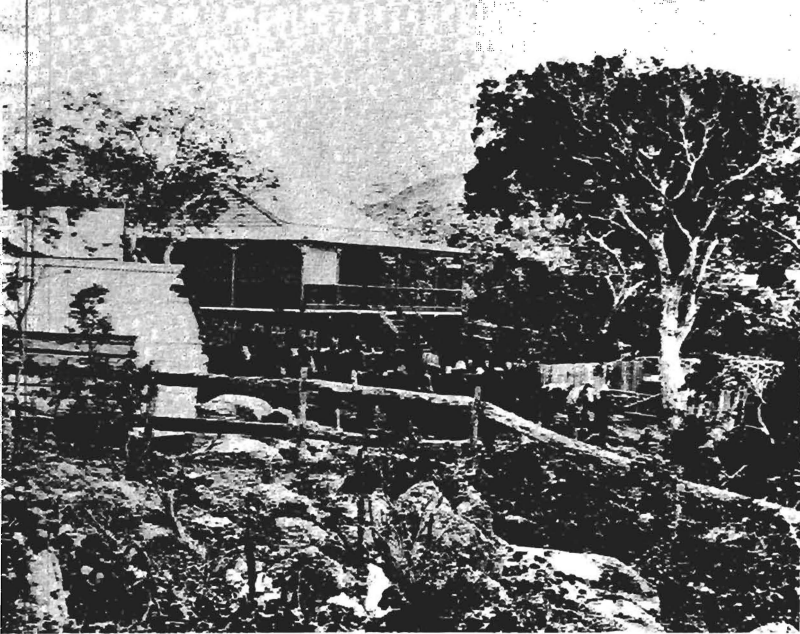
In the pioneering days of the 1800's the lot of the aborigine was not a happy one. Early settlers and cattlemen ill-treated them—often working (and considering them) as slaves, very much the inferior of their white "masters". Many instances are on record where aborigines were shot and killed—sometimes flogged to death—for such "crimes" as drinking from cattle watering holes, stealing a loaf of bread or merely because the "boss" didn't like dark skins. To be half-caste in those days was little better.

Whether Joe Flick resented the white attitude towards his mother's skin coloring, or whether he bristled against the jibes which must have come his way at mustering camps, nobody knows. We do know, however, that he was in love with an aboriginal girl who worked as a housemaid at the Brook Wayside Hotel run by Mr and Mrs Cashman. We know, too, that he returned from a mustering trip to find his father lashing his mother with a stockwhip. Flick fell upon his father and soundly thrashed him. Since his father was white, the social attitudes of the day automatically classified Flick a renegade.

The aboriginal girl discontinued her association with him and Flick blamed this upon the influence of Mr and Mrs Cashman. He attacked Cashman, but was arrested, charged with attempting to murder the publican and placed in the Normanton lock-up, from which he soon escaped and took to the bush.

In 1889 a man named Anderson lived with his wife in a house at Turn-Off Lagoon, about 200 yards from the police depot and barracks. On or about 23 October, an aborigine employed as a houseboy by the Andersons was surprised in the bush near the house by the sudden appearance of Joe Flick. Flick menaced the boy—threatening to "point the bone" unless he revealed the whereabouts of the police and the location of the police horses.

The native boy was badly frightened and told Flick what he wanted to know. Later he told Mrs Anderson what had happened and she, in turn, passed the information to Constable Wavell, when he visited the Anderson home that night. Wavell, at this time, was suffering rather badly from fever and dysentery—it was thought he may have contracted malaria, and his health was at a low ebb.



While they were talking Mrs Anderson heard someone ride up to the back of the house. Thinking it was her husband returning from a mustering trip she called: "Is that you Tom?" When there was no reply she walked outside and saw a man riding away, into the darkness. Although she could not be certain, she told Wavell that she thought the rider was Joe Flick.

Wavell had been instructed to search for the half-caste jail-breaker, and already knew Flick to be in the general area, following a horse-stealing incident and a series of thefts at *Gregory Downs*. He bade Mrs Anderson goodnight and made his way to his quarters. There he armed himself and sat watch through the remaining hours of darkness, but the mystery rider did not reappear.

At dawn, Wavell went to the nearby horse paddock to draw three of his troop horses. The remainder of the police string were running at the Corinda Police Paddock—20 miles away. He was enraged to discover his personal mount slain, together with a police horse named "Railway". Most bushmen would speak more kindly of a murderer than of a person guilty of horse-killing and Wavell's rage was fed by the pride he had held for the magnificent animal which had been his personal property.

Returning to the Anderson home, he arranged with Mrs Anderson to borrow some of her husband's saddle-horses. The woman was concerned about Wavell's poor state of health, and disturbed by the memory of a nightmare which she had experienced the previous night. She had dreamed that Joe Flick had shot and killed Constable Wavell and a man named Monnihan Wilson (a known associate of Flick, who had recently been released from jail). The dream did not deter Wavell from his vow to track down the scoundrel who had slaughtered his horse and its grazing companion. It did, however, cause him to think seriously about the possible outcome of such a hunt.

In ill health, and with his normally buoyant spirits at low ebb, he sat down and made out his will, tidied up his few personal papers and insurance certificates and tied them together in a neat bundle. This he gave to Mrs Anderson for safekeeping; together with a letter which he penned to his mother. Thus,

prepared for the worst, and accompanied by a native tracker named Jerry, Wavell mounted one of the Anderson's horses and set off to track Flick.

They arrived at Bannackburn shortly before dawn to find the manager, Symes, and his wife awake and armed. The Symes told the policeman that they had been sitting watch since shortly before midnight, when a horseman had ridden up to the house and thrown stones upon the roof. Mr Symes had run outside and fired a shot into the air, there had been an answering "hoot" from the darkness and he heard a horse galloping away.

Wavell and Jerry stayed with the Symes until daylight and then Jerry picked up the tracks of two horses, leading away from the homestead. Following these tracks he and Wavell were led across the Nicholson River and south-west in the direction of *Lawn Hill Station*. Approaching the Corinda police depot they came upon another policeman, Constable Gunn, travelling in a police dray. Wavell took the opportunity to obtain fresh horses.

With new mounts, Wavell set out accompanied by two troopers, following Flick's trail as it curved towards *Lawn Hill*. Some hours later they sighted the fugitive, riding through bush about five miles from the *Lawn Hill* homestead. Spurring their horses the troopers gave chase, and Flick—spotting the pursuing party—cut loose his pack horse and galloped towards the high-rising bluff on which the homestead stood.

Examination of the abandoned pack-horse later showed it to be a stolen police mount, named "Collector". The packs and pack-saddle were stolen too; having been taken some time earlier from the Camooweal-Gregory Downs mailman.

Approaching the homestead area the police party was fired upon by Flick and one of the troopers had his horse shot from under him. An exchange of fire followed, but Flick managed to cover the remaining distance to the homestead, and barricaded himself in the dining room; a large timber and iron building, detached from the rest of the homestead. He was soon under heavy fire from the troopers' rifles but managed to return fire with sufficient accuracy to keep the police pinned down.

EXTREME LEFT: A troop of aboriginal police "boys" mount up at a North Queensland police post in the 1880s.

LEFT: Officer in charge of Burketown police post at the time of the shooting of Senior Constable Wavell was Inspector Alexander Douglas. Although frail and slight of build, Douglas was reckoned as one of the finest bushmen in Australia, during those early days.

RIGHT: Two photographs from Queensland Police official files, show typical "bush" troopers of the period and illustrate the personal variations of standard issue uniforms which were common to the day.



In a fine show of courage, Senior Constable Wavell walked towards the dining room structure, calling upon Flick to surrender. He moved to within 25 yards of the building, when Flick fired from a window and Wavell slumped to the dust, shot dead. For Joe Flick, there could now be no turning back. He was a dead man and he must have known it.

The only employee of *Lawn Hill*, present at this time was a man named Bird. He had armed himself when the shooting broke out and now despatched one of the two remaining police to find two *Lawn Hill* employees, Doyle and Walker, who were working some miles away. He then took up a position beside the second trooper and together they continued to fire on the building in which Flick was besieged.

Led by the trooper, Doyle and Walker arrived at the homestead soon afterwards and they too began firing from vantage points surrounding the dining room. At sundown, a further two riders reined their mounts at the homestead and ran for cover near the police positions. These were the owner of *Lawn Hill*, Mr F. W. Hann and one of his aboriginal boys, named Nym.

On being informed of the situation Hann bravely stepped out from cover and walked towards Flick's barricaded position. The fugitive was well-known to Hann—he had been employed by him to break horses at *Lawn Hill* sometime earlier. Unlike many property owners of the time, Hann was regarded as

a friend by the aborigines and half-caste stockmen of the area. He treated his men well and was known to take a personal interest in their troubles and day-to-day problems. Hann was counting on his reputation and his past dealings with Flick. It was a long shot he played, and it failed.

Calling on Flick to surrender while he had his life, Hann pointed to Wavell's corpse, and Flick appeared at the window and they spoke together for a short time.

It appears that Flick promised Hann safe treatment, and Hann moved to the door of the building. Flick warily opened the door, but immediately Hann stepped forward the renegade raised his rifle and shot the station owner. The bullet struck Hann in the left breast, narrowly missing his heart. It passed around his ribs and burst out through the fleshy part of his left armpit. The shock of impact from such a point-blank firing would have stunned lesser men, yet Hann managed to raise his own rifle and—even as he fell to the ground—snapped off one shot at Flick.

Immediately after Hann collapsed the troopers and station hands unleashed a heavy period of firing to keep Flick pinned down until the wounded station-owner could crawl to safety in the growing darkness. As night fell, the firing ceased and an uneasy quiet fell over the rocky bluff on which *Lawn Hill* homestead stood. A watch was set to prevent Flick's escape but about 1 a.m. a heavy storm set in which blanketed the moon for long periods. During one of these periods of dark, Joe Flick crept out of the dining room and carefully slipped into the shadows, lowered himself over the lip of the bluff and cautiously climbed down the 120 foot face which drops steeply into *Lawn Hill* Creek.

At daybreak, the hut was rushed but the only signs of Flick were a number of spent cartridges, several bloodstains and pieces of blood-soaked cloth, suggesting that the quarry was wounded—although not seriously.

Led by the wounded Hann a party consisting of the two troopers, with *Lawn Hill* employees: Walker, Bird, O'Shea, Doyle and the tracker-boy Nym followed Flick's blood trail down the bluff and across

Lawn Hill Manager, 1970: Custodian of local history.





the Lawn Hill Creek watercourse. Less than half a mile from the homestead there came a shot from the thick bush ahead and Hann's faithful tracker, Nym, fell dead.

There followed a number of shots from the bush, but the pursuing party gained cover and none caused further injury. In the shelter of bush cover Hann held a hurried conference with his party and despatched a station-hand, OShea, to Burketown with details of the deaths of Wavell and Nym and an appeal for police assistance. Hann believed that Flick was heading for a wild gorge to the north-east of the homestead where dense vegetation, sheer rock walls, ample caves and clefts in the rock and endless spring-fed water would offer him sanctuary.

If Flick reached the gorge, his pursuers would face an almost impossible task to flush him out. It was said a man could disappear for years, living comfortably off the land, since water and game were plentiful. Even a casual watch would alert him to any pursuers before they were able to approach within several miles of any hideout. If Flick were to be caught, Hann reasoned, he must be prevented from entering the gorge.

Flick continued firing from ambush, and succeeded in holding the party down for some time. Return fire was sporadic and inaccurate, since his pursuers were unable to locate the exact position from which he was firing. Soon, however the party became aware that their shots were drawing no answering fire and they cautiously began to move forward, through the dense bush and heavy timber along the edge of Lawn Hill Creek. They found Flick's body sprawled in an ambush bower not far from the creek bank.

It was not possible to judge whether he had died by his own hand or had been hit by fire from his pursuers.

When the stench of cordite drifted away on the clear morning air, three men lay dead on *Lawn Hill*. The hunter: Wavell. The hunted: Flick. And the faithful helper: Nym.

The battle of *Lawn Hill* was over. The only victor was Death.

On 4 June 1890, action was instigated to have a tombstone erected over the rough bush grave in which Wavell's body lay. John Petrie and Sons, Monumental Masons of Brisbane and Townsville, successfully tendered for the job. They quoted the police department £17/10/0 for the headstone in marble, plus £4/19/0 for inlaid lead lettering. There was a further charge of £5/0/0 to cover the cost of transporting the stone to *Lawn Hill* and erecting it.

Erection of the stone was officially sanctioned by the Police Commissioner on 9 September 1890, and was set in place on 21 January 1891. Today the grave of Senior Constable Wavell remains in a remarkably good state of preservation. Surrounded by a wrought iron fence, it is maintained by the staff of *Lawn Hill Station*.

Less than a dozen paces away is a gaunt steel pipe, square, marking Joe Flick's resting place. No stone, no plate—not even a rough wooden marker to identify the bones below. Society doesn't erect monuments for horsethieves. The owners of *Lawn Hill* ordered the pipe fence erected over Flick's grave to mark the spot. Like the grave of the policeman he killed, Flick's grave is tended by employees of the property.

About 200 yards away, on the opposite bank of the creek, tucked in hard below the bluff of *Lawn Hill*, is the grave of poor Nym. This too is surrounded by a plain pipe fence but surmounted by a marble headstone, inlaid with lead bought and erected by his former boss, F. H. Hann. The pipe fence was added in recent years, by the present *Lawn Hill* owners.

A sad and lonely story. One man doomed to die because he violated social laws based upon the color of his skin . . . a second so convinced of his impending death that he wrote his will And a third; to whom death came almost as an afterthought; and whose epitaph tells all one needs to know of him:

"A Faithful Boy Was NYM."

MIMAG WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS APPRECIATION TO THE FOLLOWING FOR THEIR ASSISTANCE IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS ARTICLE:

Mr and Mrs W. Kahl of Lawn Hill Station.

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Mr W. Wilcox, Mount Isa Sports Depot.

In particular, we wish to thank the Officer In Charge of Mount Isa Police, Inspector W. Gall, on whose research notes much of this story was based.

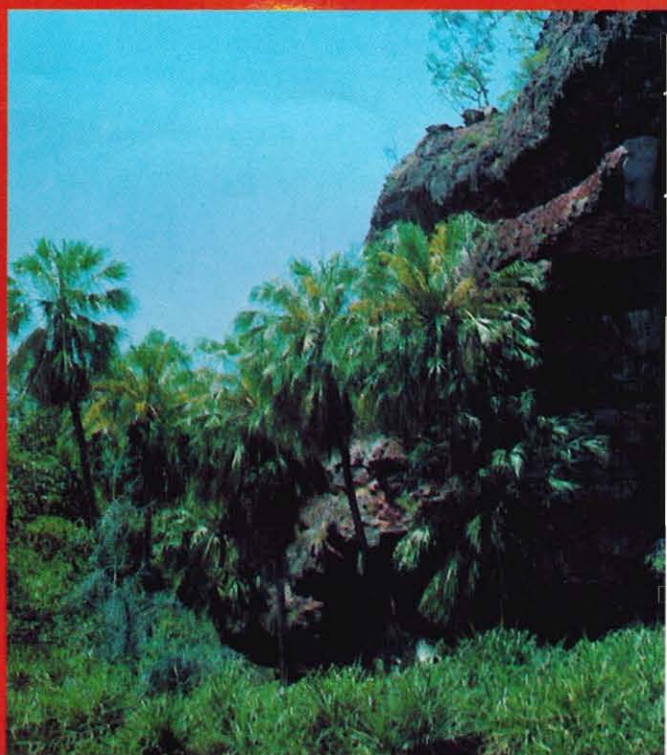
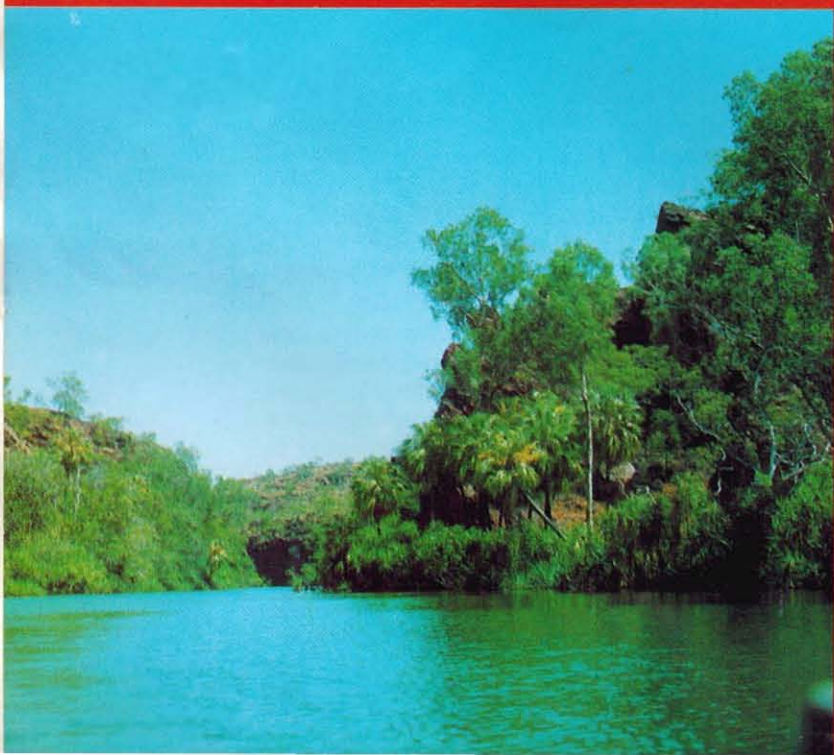
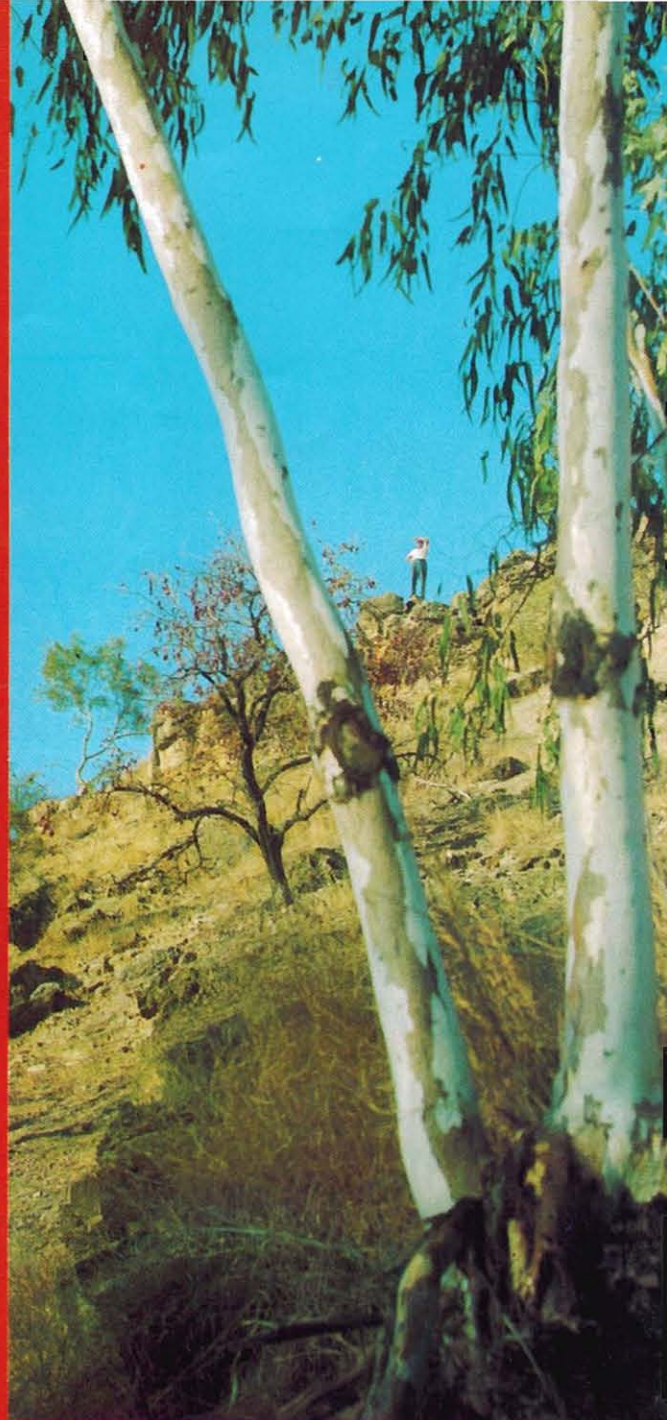
Editor.



Lawn Hill manager, Bill Kahl shows Inspector Tom Gall the spot where half-caste murderer Joe Flick descended the bluff above Lawn Hill Creek to escape police.

RIGHT: Flick's escape route down the bluff, framed between the trunks of two gum trees. The figure on the edge of the bluff indicates the spot where the fugitive slipped quietly over the edge, under cover of darkness.

BELOW: Surely one of the most beautiful spots in Outback Queensland, the gorge on Lawn Hill Creek is lined with dense underbrush and pandanus and rimmed by virtually unscalable rock walls on three sides. Its almost impregnable sanctuary was Flick's goal.





Inspector Tom Gall examines the inscription on the ornate headstone marking the grave of Senior Constable Alfred Wavell.



ABOVE RIGHT: A few paces from the grave of his victim, a simple pipe fence surrounds the grave of murderer Joe Flick. Both graves are maintained by the employees of Lawn Hill station.

BELOW RIGHT: Third victim of the gun battle at Lawn Hill, Nym, a station employee, lies beneath the decaying trunk of an old river gum. His headstone was erected by his former employers.

BELOW: The modern, functional homestead of Lawn Hill, stands on the foundations of the original station homestead at the scene of the gun battle.

