

A Season of Happiness



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THE DRONE DROVERS

Sean and Candy were brother and sister who lived on a Station. Now, this wasn't your usual train station: Mulla Flats was a sheep station that was like a farm only much, much bigger. It had to be because the thousands of sheep that were raised there needed food; and grass of any kind was spread far and wide across what most would think was a desert. You see, Mulla Flats Station was in the outback of Western Australia. It was different from those places where most town folk lived; in fact, the Woolrich family and a handful of workers were the only people for hundreds of kilometres. Even the nearest school was too far to travel, so the children studied on what is known as the School of the Air, learning over the radio.

They didn't mind this, nor that it was dry most of the time, another reason why grass grew only sparsely and the sheep had to go a long way to find it. However, the time of year was approaching known as The Wet, when the rains would hopefully come. This hadn't happened for the past two years; but, everyone at Mulla Flats was keeping fingers crossed for a good downpour that would soak the parched earth and bring life back to the Station. Pete Woolrich had just been on the radio to the weather bureau. "They reckon it won't be long, Marge," he said to his wife, a grim look on his face. "There's a big storm on its way down, may hit us tomorrow if we're lucky; sooner if not." Pushing up from the chair, he headed for the door. "I'll gather the crew. We need to move the sheep to higher ground, and we haven't got long."

Marge nodded her understanding. "I'll take the Ute to town and pick up extra supplies, just in case we get cut off like we did last time a big wet came."

"You be careful, then," said Pete over his shoulder. "It's a long drive."

"Only five hours there and back," she assured her husband. "I'll be right."

While this was going on in the house, Sean and Candy were out in the yard looking over Jacko's shoulder. He was one of the workers and he had been checking where all the sheep were, using the new drone. It was like a mini-helicopter that he was operating with a handset much like a video-game controller. A small screen on the handset received a picture from a camera under the drone, so he could see whatever the drone flew over; and it could still be operated from the controller even when it was a long way off. "A pity our drones can't go as far," commented Sean. He was meaning the drones each of the children had been given as birthday presents.

"Well, they are only toys, really," Candy reminded him, "But it would have been nice to be able to help."

Jacko looked up. "Not a good idea," he warned. "If you don't know what you're doing, you could spook the sheep. They aren't the smartest of creatures." Hearing a shout from the Boss, Pete, he took off for his quad, taking the controller with him.

Here was another thing that had changed over the years. In the past, mustering the sheep had been done on horseback, whereas these days quad bikes were used. Being country kids, Sean and Candy had been allowed to ride them once in a while; under supervision, of course. At that moment, however, every single quad was being used to move the sheep to higher ground. The jumbucks, sheep that is, were all over the place in mobs; some small with thirty or less, others over a hundred. As he located a mob with his drone, Jacko would give directions using his hand-radio to the other drovers, telling them where the scattered mobs of sheep were.

In the meantime, the two children were just finishing the last of their own chores. The chickens had been put back in the chook-house and Candy was collecting the few eggs she could find. "They seem to be off the lay," she said. "I've only got six."

"Could be because of the weather," suggested Sean. "Animals can sense things humans can't, even dumb ones like chooks." Both of them looked towards the house when a horn attached to the outside wall started blaring. "That's the two-way," said the boy. "I hope Mum hasn't broken down."

They raced into the house. Candy made it first to the radio and picked up the call: "This is Dad," said Pete. "Jacko reckons there's a small mob in Tucker's Creek. It's dry at the moment, but if as much water comes down as they say it might, they'll all drown in a flash. We won't have time to get to them. This a lot to ask, I know - could you take the tractor and see if you can bring them home, or at least get them out of the creek bed?" Then he added: "Old Digger may be of use, if he can remember how. One last thing - just don't take any chances, eh. If anything happens to you two, your mum'll kill me."

So, it was all on for young and old. "I'll go fire up the tractor," said Sean.

He was almost at the door when Candy advised: "Best take the grey Fergy."

"Why?" queried her brother, "It's old and slow."

"I know," his sister came back, "But the carry-all's still attached and Digger needs something to ride on. He might not make it to Tucker's Creek and back if he has to walk." While Sean was fetching the tractor, his sister went to look for Digger. He was a border collie who had been around ever since Candy could remember. Grey on the muzzle and eyes misting over now, he had been a wonder in his day: rounding up the sheep from dawn till dusk; and much of the time he knew exactly what to do without being told as if he was born to it; which he was. That was a while back, though: lately he spent most of the time sleeping. Whether he could rekindle some of his old spark would be tested soon enough.

Sean was waiting in the yard with the tractor carry-all sitting on the ground. Digger seemed quite excited as he hopped on. It was as if he was thinking: Woo-Hoo! I'm going somewhere again like I used to. Candy was about to climb on when she hesitated. "Hang five, Sean. Got an idea; back in a jiffy." And she raced off, returning a few minutes later carrying a shopping bag.

"What have you got in there?" asked Sean.

"Our drones and the controllers," replied his sister.

"They won't be any good," he sneered. "It's nearly a mile to Tucker's Creek. They don't have the range."

"Not from here," she began explaining, "But what if the sheep have moved on from the creek before we get there? We could be driving around forever and not find them. At least we can use the drones to search the area."

"Yeah, okay." Sean didn't sound very convinced. He waited for Candy to climb on next to Digger and once she was aboard he raised the carry-all off the ground. "I can't see why the mob would wander off somewhere else," the boy commented.

“They probably only went there in the first place for water and I reckon that’s where they’ll stay. Right, we’re off. Hold tight.”

The journey to Tucker’s Creek was slow and bumpy causing the carry-all to bounce around. “Are you deliberately driving over every rock and pothole you can find?” Candy shouted irritably. He didn’t answer; either because he chose not to, or he hadn’t heard over the noise of the tractor engine. Glancing to the north she could see that the sky had darkened considerably, and the wind was picking up driving red dust before it. There was definitely a storm on its way. Hopefully it would take its time and wouldn’t be there for a while. Despite the dust making it hard to see any distance, as they neared the creek it was obvious that the sheep had moved on. “I knew bringing the drones was a good idea,” said Candy with a smirk.

Sean remained silent as he stood up from the seat to scan the surrounding area. “Judging by the footmarks they’ve been in the creek,” he observed, “But it’s almost dry except for a few muddy puddles that they’ve been tromping in.” It was easy enough to see which direction the mob had taken from the hoof-prints. “Looks like they’ve gone through The Gap,” he added.

“Isn’t there a waterhole on the other side? Maybe that’s where they’ve gone,” suggested the girl. “I’ll send up a drone for a look.”

Candy took her drone from the bag and walked a few paces to a suitable spot where she set it down on the sand. Digger seemed very interested and padded over to have a look. “Come away,” she commanded, “Unless you want a piece out of your nose when it starts up.” Digger gave her that sad look, as if to say: you’re no fun anymore. He took the advice, though, and went back to the carry-all where he sat watching. As soon as the drone started up and rose in the air, the dog gave a bark; and when it began heading across the creek towards The Gap he ran after it. “Here, Digger,” Candy shouted, “Here, boy.” When he failed to respond, the girl called over her shoulder: “Give him a whistle, Sean.”

“Don’t worry about him,” said the boy as he came over to look at the screen on the drone’s controller. “He’ll be okay.” The mini-helicopter was now passing over The Gap, a narrow gully between two small rocky outcrops. “Take it up a bit,” said Sean. “We’ll see more; and remember what Jacko said – we don’t want to spook the sheep; always assuming we can find them.” A few minutes later they were spotted. Some were grazing on the odd clump of grass, while most were at the edge of a waterhole drinking. Digger was there too: prowling, keeping his distance.

“Are you going to take the tractor through?” asked Candy.

Sean shook his head. “The noise might scatter them. I’ll turn the Fergy round, ready to head home. I reckon our best bet is to stay here and use the drones to bring them through The Gap to us. Once they’re over the creek, we should be able to drive behind them. That should keep them moving. I’ll go get my drone up.”

The plan was fairly simple. Unfortunately, so were sheep; and as soon as they heard the drones coming closer they panicked and bolted in different directions. “Back off,” ordered Sean. Both drones hovered in the air, then rose and drifted away from the waterhole. After a minute or so, the sheep settled and just stood gazing into the sky. Sean and Candy watched them on the controller screens.

“Look,” said Candy. “Digger’s starting to round them up.”

The old dog had certainly not lost his touch. He moved fairly slowly; not because of his age - it was especially important to avoid spooking the sheep. It was also the way he had always rounded them up: circling the strays, closing in on them, driving them back into the main mob. Once the sheep were huddled together, he stood motionless; then Digger did something strange. He looked up and towards the

drones and his mouth opened a couple of times. Being on the far side of The Gap the children couldn't hear it, but Candy said: "I think he's barking at us."

"You could be right," said Sean. "I reckon he's ready to move the mob out and he wants the drones to help."

"Would he know to do that?" queried the girl. "From what I recall, Digger never worked with drones."

"He might be a bit long in the tooth," commented her brother, "But he always learned quickly, more so than the other dogs. We have to assume it's what he wants. Let's start the drones towards the mob and see what he does."

The two mini-helicopters began drifting slowly, staying high at first until they were just behind Digger. He was watching intently. When they were where he must have wanted them, he gave a single bark and began edging forward as if stalking the sheep. A few heads turned with blank looks on their faces. Two of them spotted the drones coming and trotted away from the mob. Digger was onto them in a flash; circling again, closing, urging them back to the others. His next move must have been instinctive as he advanced and quickened his pace. Next he was going sideways, this way and that behind the mob, encouraging them towards The Gap.

The flock of sheep were together to start with, but they began to spread out. Digger raced to the left and brought the strays back in, before running to the far side for the others. He stopped, looked up into the sky and barked three times. "I think we've had our orders," said Sean. "Time to push them through The Gap."

Once the drones closed in behind them, the sheep broke into a trot. Digger ran from side to side, herding them together while the drone drivers kept them on into The Gap. When they were all through and across the creek Sean grounded his drone and left Candy and Digger to keep the mob moving. They seemed to have settled into an old routine, with one at the front leading and the rest following along behind, as sheep do. Satisfied that all was going well, Sean hopped onto the old Fergy and fired it up. Candy was walking with her drone controller held before her. Catching up to her, Sean asked: "Do you want a ride?"

The girl shook her head. "If Digger can manage the walk, so can I."

They were home well before nightfall, although it didn't seem like it. Dark clouds blanketed the sky and some spots of rain had begun to pepper the dry dirt. By then, the sheep had been put into a yard close to the house which was slightly raised, so the animals wouldn't be standing in water when the wet came. Which it did, just as Pete and his crew returned. He saw the sheep were safely penned in the yard and he nodded at the children. "We managed to get ours to higher ground; and you've done really well with your mob; but I knew you would. How did Digger go?"

"Brilliant," said Sean with a beaming smile. "We couldn't have done it without him. Isn't that right, old mate?" he added, looking at Digger stretched out close by.

Candy heard a vehicle approaching and said: "Mum's home. I hope she's brought something special for dinner." Digger raised his head and gave a small bark. Presumably, he agreed. Then his eyes closed. In moments he was twitching and making small whimpering noises.

"Probably dreaming," suggested Pete, "And I bet he's got a lot to dream about,"

Digger certainly had: dreaming doggy dreams of years gone by; and some that seemed more like today. But they couldn't be, of course – or could they?