



# Dougie, Dougie, Dougie

Words and images: Mike Ferris

I wonder how many readers of these pages would remember crusty old Doug Sunderland?

**D**ougie was for many years the manager of the service department for Wangaratta Toyota, but he was probably better known for his role as Chief Steward and Race Marshall at Phillip Island in the 1970s and '80s. His main claim to notoriety was he once black-flagged Mal Campbell for a noncompliant motorcycle while Campbell was winning a race.

Doug did many tours with us over the years and he was always rather entertaining. He'd led a fascinating life and could spin many a yarn. He enjoyed holding court and playing the raconteur.

He first appeared on our radar in mid-1997 at the tender age of 73. He'd lost his beloved wife of 50 years some 12 months earlier and by his own admission had fallen into something of a dark hole, uninspired and unmotivated, and not interested in anything. It was his doctor who galvanised him into action, telling him to "...get on that bloody bike of yours and go for a ride somewhere!"



## MIKE FERRIS

### **No nonsense**

Doug had read some articles about our Himalayan Heights safari and was interested in having a look at that part of the world. He gave me a call and we discussed the tour for a while, and he said he'd like to sign up. Being a bit on the cautious side of cynical he didn't want to just send me a deposit cheque. He wanted to come and see me in person so he could eyeball me face-to-face. I had absolutely no problem with this, except Doug lived in Wangaratta, Victoria, and I was about 600km away in the northern suburbs of Sydney.

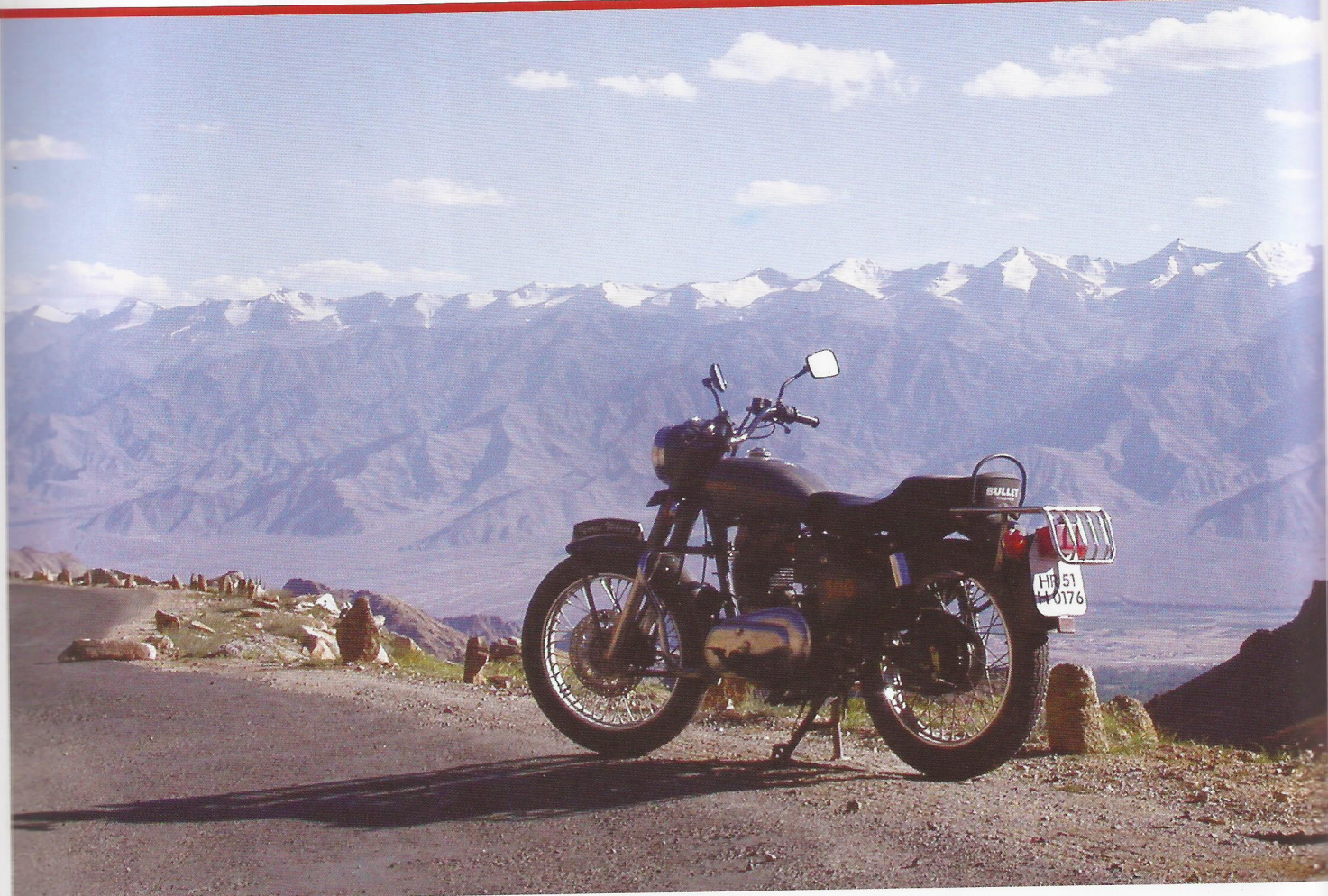
*“He told me some stories of his motorcycling experiences, including crossing the Simpson Desert solo 16 times.”*

As I was to learn, small obstacles of that nature were no deterrent to Doug Sunderland. He said, “I’ll see you Sat’dee afternoon.”

Doug caught a train from Wang to Sydney, changed at Central for the Northern Line to Chatswood, then walked 500 metres up the hill to where I lived. When I answered the knock on my door, it was my turn to be on the cynical side of cautious – he was wheezing, red in the face, looked every bit of 73 and certainly not in prime

Main: Doug went to Peru with World On Wheels and visited Machu Picchu, rode the world’s largest salt pan and enjoyed the other incredible experiences. Left: He first appeared on the World On Wheels radar in mid-1997 at the tender age of 73.





condition to be heading to the highest road in the world. But after a cup of tea and 10 minutes recuperation he told me some stories of his motorcycling experiences, including crossing the Simpson Desert solo 16 times, and I began to realize there was a bit more to this crusty codger than met the eye. And he wasn't taking no for an answer anyway. He counted out the \$500 deposit in \$20 bills on the table.

### **Problem solved**

To cut many long stories short, Doug completed our 1997 Himalayan Heights safari in far better form than some of the much-younger participants. But on the second-last day he had a stroke of bad luck – his daypack containing his camera and all the photos from his 20-day tour fell off the back of his bike and was lost. He was understandably pissed off for a while, but two days later, in a philosophical frame of mind as he boarded the plane home, he again counted out some cash into my hand and said, "I'll just have to come back and do it again next year."

### **Dubbed**

Doug backed up for the 1998 Himalayan tour and managed to hold on to his photos that time.

There's a story that remains vivid in my memory.

We'd stopped at a roadside restaurant and, as we waited for our lunch, I'd asked for a plate of salad to be put on the table. Doug was in the middle of relating a long-winded story (as was not uncommon) when he glanced at the plate, upon which remained just a couple of green

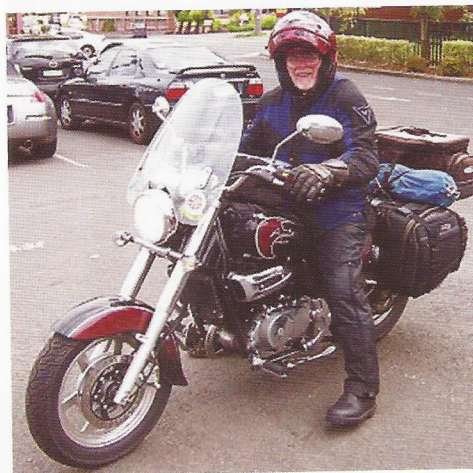
beans. "Crikey," he said. "You gotta be quick around here with you vultures." He popped both beans into his mouth and chomped into them with enthusiasm.

Of course, they weren't green beans, they were chillies.

His glasses fogged up, he had tears running down his cheeks and steam coming out of his ears. His hair stood on end. I thought he was going to drop dead on the spot, but we couldn't help rolling in hysterics. "I'm on fire!" he rasped, and grabbed a glass of water, which of course made no difference whatsoever. I had to get him a bucket of yoghurt to quell the volcano. We gave him the nickname 'Lord Greenbean' for that little episode.

### **Revelation**

Towards the end of that 1998 tour, Doug mentioned to me he was pretty keen



Above: The 1998 Himalayan tour meant a new set of photos.

Left: Doug led a fascinating life and could spin many a yarn.

Top right: Dougie (right) was probably best known for his role as Chief Steward and Race Marshall at Phillip Island in the 1970s and '80s.

to get home because his mother was becoming a bit of a handful. I looked at him in disbelief, not knowing whether he was pulling my leg or not. Doug himself was by that time nearly 75. How old could his mother possibly be?

"Yeah, she's getting on a bit now and I think I might have to put her into a home soon," he explained.

This man's already fascinating life was on the verge of another bizarre turn. He told me later his mother's physical and mental deterioration dictated there was no alternative but for him to sign her over into professional care. That necessitated Doug looking through a drawer of her private papers in search of her Medicare insurance and so forth, whereupon, at the tender age of 75, he came across his own adoption papers.

Doug had lived his whole life not knowing his mother was in fact not his birth mother. You can imagine it might have come as something of a shock. He decided he had to confront her with his discovery, gently of course, and at her bedside a couple of days later he said to her, "Mum, there's something I need to talk to you about. I've just found out I'm adopted."

His mum smiled a distant smile, stroked his arm and said, "Are you darling? Isn't that nice?"

### **Irony**

Another story tinged with tragedy comes to mind, but I'll change the names to protect all parties concerned.

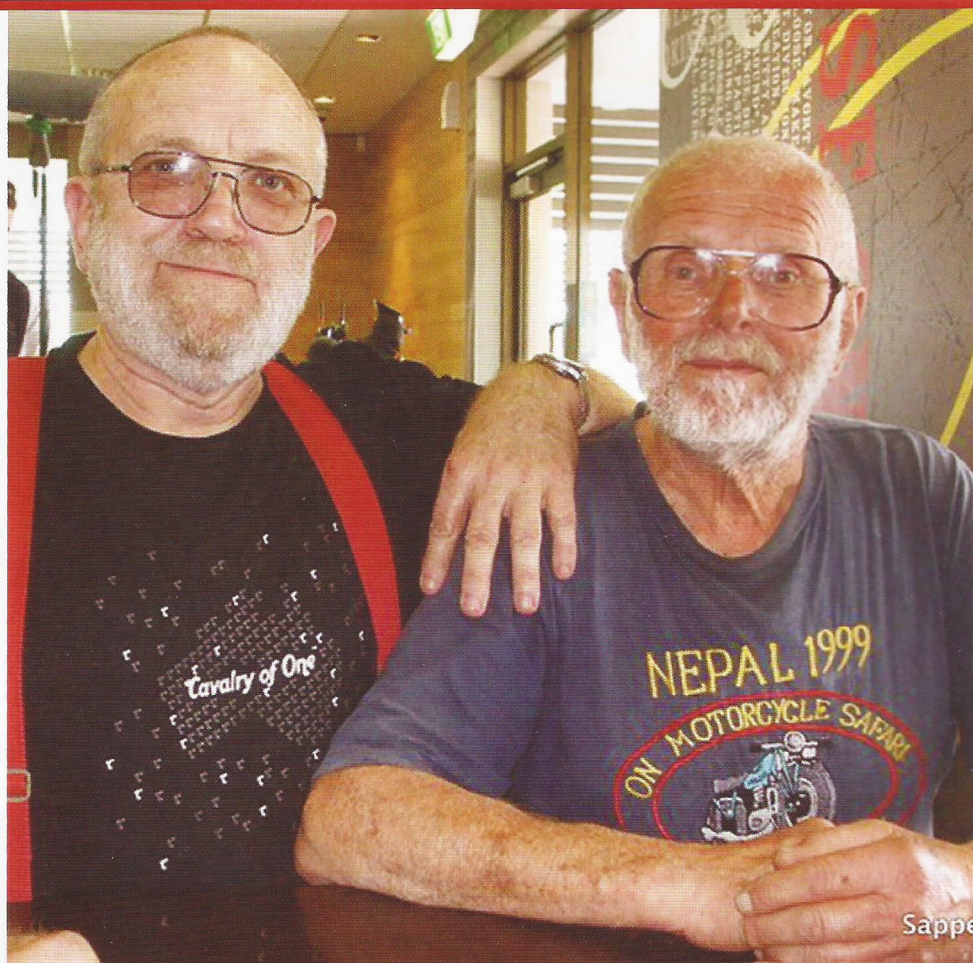
Doug had suffered from prostate cancer for many years, and his doctor (we'll call him 'Dr Richards') had been constantly at him to get it treated. "It's gonna kill you Doug, if we don't cut it out of you."

"No way," was Doug's constant response. "I've been under the knife too many times already for one man. I'm not having another operation. I'll just have to trust in the power of positive thought."

Dr Richards had rolled his eyes and conceded he wasn't going to win.

It came to a head when Doug wanted to do our Awesome Andes tour in November 2002 and went for a checkup first in October. Dr Richards examined his prostate again and declared, "This is too serious to ignore now, Doug. You mark my words. You won't see Christmas if you don't have this operation right away."

"I don't have time for an operation,"



Doug replied. "I'm off to Peru to ride across the Andes."

So Doug went to Peru with us and visited Machu Picchu, rode the world's largest salt pan and enjoyed the other incredible experiences and locations of that amazing country. He came back and showed everyone the photos, and Christmas of course came and went and he was still very much alive. In March he decided it was time for his regular six-monthly checkup with the good doctor, so he dialed the number.

"Hello Rebecca, it's Doug Sunderland," he said. "I need to make an appointment to see Dr Richards please."

Rebecca was silent for a moment or two before replying in a quiet voice, "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Sunderland. Doctor Richards passed away just before Christmas."

### **Time**

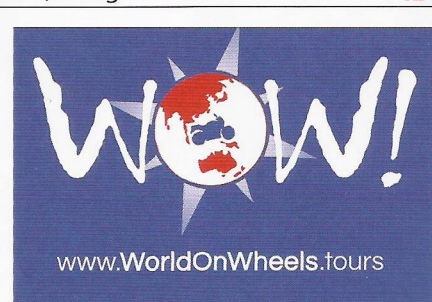
All good things must come to an end, and in 2013 it was Dougie's turn. His family had made the tough decision to put him into professional care, but Doug obviously didn't think much of that idea and he shuffled quietly off, just a few

years short of his 90th.

My wife Denise and I drove down from Sydney to Wangaratta for the funeral, which was a quiet affair of mostly family and a few close friends. At the request of family, only family members were permitted to speak, which we thought was a bit odd. But perhaps it was just as well. We may have gone a long way past the appointed hour if I'd been permitted to take the microphone.

RIP, Dougie.

**ADV**



*Himalayan Heights safari and Awesome Andes are both the tours in the World On Wheels portfolio.*

Check out the website at:  
[www.WorldOnWheels.tours](http://www.WorldOnWheels.tours)