



CALL OUT: Tending to a patient along the Birdsville track with George Black.

# Working in war zones for people

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Highly decorated Red Cross nurse Andrew Cameron has recently published his first book. I caught up with him and asked a few questions about his life.

**Why did you write the book?**

My mother wrote a memoir of several hundred pages of her colourful life and we bound it together for family distribution. There were many interesting things which we did not know about her. It was a jolly good read. As for my father, I am sure he had many stories, but he fell off the perch before recounting them to us. I just intended to write down some of my past for the benefit of my two daughters and now suddenly it has turned into a published book, thanks to Massey University Press. Really I don't think I have done anything more than the average Joe, but obviously they saw some merit in my journey so far. Everyone has a story to tell.

**■ Did the work ethic you grew up with stand you in good stead for your chosen career path?**

My parents didn't tolerate too many complaints from us kids — the theme was always to get on with the work at hand until the job was finished. Yes, I'd say those formative years made an indelible print on the life I've led so far.

**■ Do you think the number and variety of different jobs you had after you left school and your subsequent nomadic existence set you up for the variety and attitude you needed in your nursing roles?**

Yes, I think it has been a help. I soon learnt not to value possessions too much, really they're just a hindrance. I like to learn new things and if this means moving here and there, then that's what I do.

**■ How different was your first Red Cross assignment to what you'd imagined?**

Mind-blowingly different. Even though I was in my 40s, I was still a real green-skin and had no idea of life in an area of conflict. I was sent to work in a huge field hospital for Sudanese war victims (600 patients under canvas at times) in the far north of Kenya for six months. I had to adjust to the way of working with limited resources and dealing with large numbers of gun-shot-wounded patients at any one time. But I am very pleased I got to experience working and living in such an environment with such wonderful colleagues from all over the world.

**■ What sort of coping mechanisms did you use to get you through the rougher moments/days?**



PREPARED: Andrew Cameron at Ayr hospital.

In the wars I've been in, I formed strong bonds with my comrades. You share your difficulties, talk things over and this gets you through those tough times. A trouble shared is a trouble halved.

**■ Have you maintained friendships with colleagues over the years?**

This is not so easy. Being a bit nomadic you tend to lose contact with many colleagues and other people. But the good thing is meeting them again after 10 or 20 years and seeing them basically just the same.

**■ What haunts you?**

Seeing people in pain haunts me. I always want to do something to help them.

**■ How do you cope with/rationalise living in such contrast – war/peace versus our first-world problems?**

Coming home is the hard part. In the first world, many people complain about trivial things which those in the third world would not even mention as a problem.

**■ You learned from your mum, "Life isn't fair, but you just have to keep on and make the best of things". Is this something you live by?**

Gosh yes. It is a complete accident of life as to which parents you get and how your formative years are. Many things in life are not fair but it is no use bemoaning that fact. Each and every day I try to improve myself in some small way or another, and the prospects for my family.

# Braving danger to help others

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And if you can have fun along the way, then all the better.

■ **Would you consider yourself to be brave?**

No, not really. But then I seldom get too excitable when in difficult situations. What will be will be. Solve the problem and move on.

■ **What has your bit of normality been among the terror?**

Ah, we always have a safe place to hunker down in — it could be worse. You just think how lucky you are. If I am going to be in a place for a year or so, I grow a garden in what space is available — this is quite literally a grounding experience. You watch those little seeds emerge from the earth and give the excess produce away to the neighbours at harvest time. It makes you happy, and them too.

■ **Is Red Cross nursing a young person's game?**

Yes and no. Youth brings vigour and bravado, which is all well and good. But in the humanitarian-aid world, we often work in cultures where a head of grey hair (what you have left of it), can be a definite advantage. Some



**ATTENTIVE:** Andrew was head nurse at Juba Teaching Hospital in South Sudan.

clans or tribespeople would prefer to converse with the father, rather than the son.

■ **What does retirement look like to you?**

Retirement in 10 years or so looks pretty good. But

retirement to me means learning something else and embarking on some new project or another. I cannot sit still for too long.

■ **What is the biggest lesson you have learned?**

We have two ears and only one mouth, so as a nurse you should listen twice as much as you talk. Actions speak louder than words.

I think that would be a good lesson.

## BOOK REVIEW

# Gripping tale of bravery, caring

**A Nurse on the Edge of the Desert** by Andrew Cameron  
review by Brenda Powden  
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Although Andrew Cameron is a friend and I could be accused of being biased, I can't imagine anybody not being hooked from the first page of his recently published debut book, *A Nurse on the Edge of the Desert*.

His book, with black and white images, is a moving tribute to a life of dedication, grit, bravery and caring — also one of stark contrasts. He took me from the familiar, nostalgic and safe humble beginnings of his childhood in Napier to the complete



way from home.

Andrew is very matter-of-fact and accepting of wherever he finds himself — treating those in the Australian outback ravaged by the effects of alcohol abuse and domestic violence with the same dignity and respect as those with the Ebola virus or suffering from wounds inflicted by war. His

opposite — his nursing career which took him to the unfamiliar, the unsafe and often unpredictable war zones, a long

compassion and energy seem endless, always going above and beyond the call of duty, while adopting a 'why not?' attitude. Nothing is too much trouble.

Andrew's humility, humour and kindness carry him through some dangerous and dodgy situations during his years as a Red Cross nurse. He draws on the ethics of hard work instilled in childhood to take up opportunities — and sometimes seemingly out of his reach — finding time to train in basic dental work, graduate as a midwife and write hospital training manuals. Although Andrew's humanitarian work is near the top of an outstanding list

of achievements, his marriage to German doctor Daniela and raising teenage daughters Emily and Josephine, are perhaps his proudest.

Cleverly woven throughout the book is a commentary from Birdsville, where the annual world-famous Birdsville Races are gearing up, and Andrew is director of nursing at the one health facility.

He has been awarded numerous honours for his work, including the Order of Australia and the coveted Florence Nightingale Medal. This is an easy to read, funny, addictive and inspirational story, reminding us we are all better off having people like Andrew Cameron among us.