

Todd Russell

- *back in the bush*

by Jennifer Martens

This is a story about Todd Russell: father, hunter, former miner. A real Aussie hero. If you haven't heard of him, pardon the pun, but you must have been living under a rock. Todd spent two weeks trapped 1km below the earth's surface with co-worker Brant Webb. His thoughts were centred on family and friends, memories and survival. He had an infinite amount of time and yet simultaneously, very little time to think. Most of his thoughts were related to survival; fighting to stay positive and not giving in to the circumstances. He thought about everything - even the new .222 Ruger he had just purchased and hadn't had an opportunity to use.



A good number of foxes were taken by Todd and his hunting companions.

Thankfully, Todd's nightmare and the possibility of never getting to use his new firearm were only temporary as he and Brant were rescued after 14 hellish days. Due to public appearances, photo shoots, interviews and simply spending quality time with his family, Todd has yet to give the Ruger its first workout. But he is grateful that it is his own schedule that is keeping him from combing the fields in search of vermin, rather than the tons of rock that once threatened his life.

Todd has told of the perilous tale of him and his mate more than a few times, but there are still a few things about him that you'll only learn in this publication.

Todd learned to handle a firearm as a youngster while accompanying his father on many Sunday strolls looking for feral pests. When he was about eight years old, he was entrusted with a firearm of his own. His father was adamant about safety, impressing upon Todd the importance of knowing the location of all members of a hunting party, never pointing a loaded firearm at anyone, or at anything unless it was a target, and following the proper procedures when climbing over or under fences. Todd shares his father's passion for safety and he is keen to pass it on to his children. Liam, his six-year-old son, seems most likely to carry on the Russell family tradition of hunting in the Tasmanian countryside. For Liam, to carry on the tradition will mean waiting until he is 18 years of age to comply with difficult Tasmanian hunting regulations.

"I'll shoot anywhere that I can get permission," says Todd. Mostly he finds himself hunting bennetts wallabies, Tasmanian pademelons and possums (with a permit) around the Fingal Valley





He thought about everything - even the new .222 Ruger he had just purchased and hadn't had an opportunity to use.

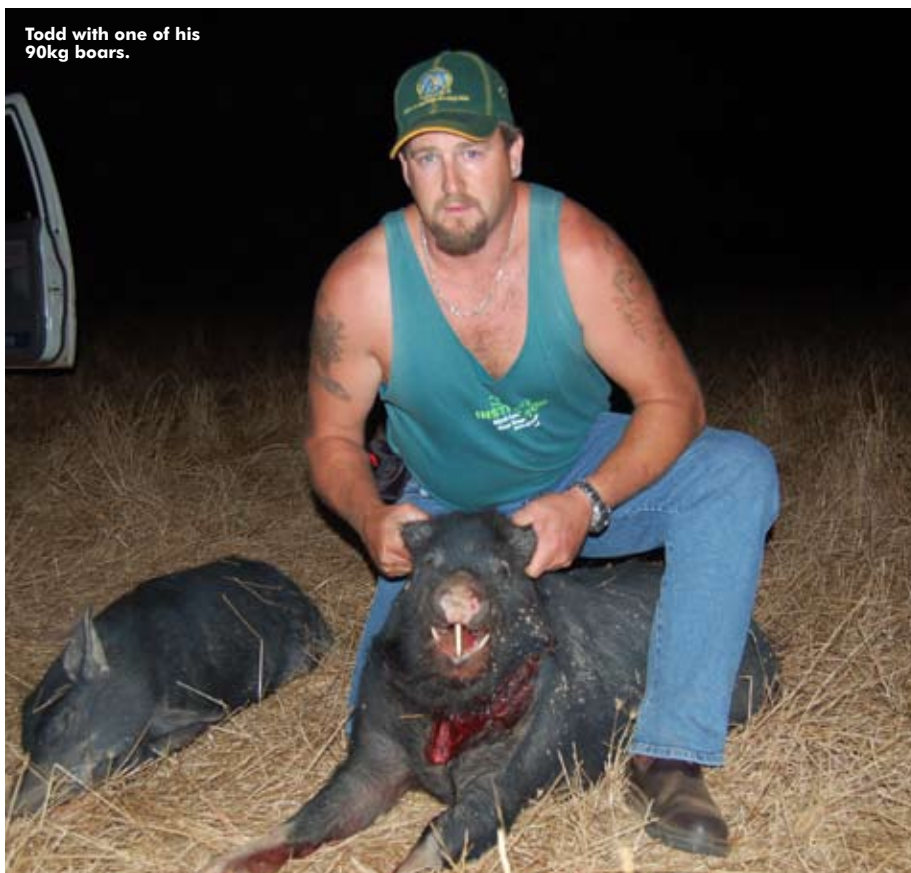
Todd Russell - back in the bush

using his .22 Browning or his SKB over-and-under shotgun. He'll soon be adding a new Beretta shotgun to his collection and he says he is definitely looking forward to taking some time to put that, along with the Ruger, to good use.

Of all the hunting he has done, he is fond-est of deer hunting. "I love fallow deer," says Todd. "I love the challenge of stalking and getting myself into the best position for a shot." Once a year he and his father, his former brother-in-law and a group of friends from the Beaconsfield/Launceston area spend a week or two hunting these elusive animals. He's been hunting this specie on and off for the past 16 years or so and has managed to take home three of them using his preferred combination of a .270 CMC Mountaineer with 150-grain Core-Lokt ammunition. "About three years ago in the Southern Midlands I shot a deer that measured about the 230-mark on the Douglas scale," he said. His goal, not surprisingly, is to "get anything bigger than that". Short of a trophy, Todd is happy to simply provide food for the table - and venison is quite a treat. "I like to have sausages made and get the backstrap cut into butterfly steaks." He's not into slaving over the fire to concoct any complicated recipes, preferring merely to cook the steaks in a frying pan with a few simple spices.



Russell and Ron with four of their six pigs.



Todd with one of his 90kg boars.

When his annual deer hunting trip comes around, Todd usually loads up his Yamaha Grizzly 660 into his Toyota Hilux, tosses in his swag, which he sets up on the flatbed under a canopy, and enjoys the freedom of the bush. This year, however, the Hilux will carry a new ATV - the Kubota RTV 900, courtesy of Boya Machinery in WA.

Since surviving his ordeal, Todd has had to adjust the way he hunts due to subsequent knee problems, for which he underwent a bone graph and knee realignment in January this year. "Any relief will be good," he says. "I can't walk the hills like I used to and that's why I'm hoping to use the Kubota during this year's deer season. It will make things a lot easier."

Hunting may be Todd's first love, but he also enjoys playing Aussie Rules football and, "any other sport that keeps me active". Until his knee recovers, however, he'll just have to settle for barracking for his favourite team - the mighty Brisbane Lions.

Ron Bryant, President of the SSAA (WA), recently took Todd on a hunting trip just a few hours out of Perth. There, Ron, Todd and Michael Piscioneri, Todd's best mate from his school days, spent two days hunting foxes and feral pigs. For Todd, this trip was full of 'firsts'. It was his first hunt on mainland Australia and the first time he >

Todd Russell - back in the bush

had taken part in a fox hunt. Using a .22-250 Remington, a Sako 6mm and a Winchester .30-30 lever-action fitted with a brand-new Arctic Fox illuminated reticle scope, the trio shot seven foxes and six pigs. The boars averaged about 80 to 90kg and presented quite a challenge. Contributing to the group's success on the pigs was the performances of the .30-30 and the scope. Todd went as far as calling the Arctic Fox "a bloody ripper!"

For Todd, the highlight of the trip was "seeing Ron and Michael's faces light up after shooting their first feral pigs". As he recalled shooting his first pig years ago on Old Flinders Island in Tasmania, he said he could definitely relate to the excitement the two were experiencing.

Travelling in a Holden Rodeo Twin Cab, Ron, Todd and Michael chased foxes until 4am, which gave them plenty of time to chat. Todd recounted his meeting with Prime Minister John Howard during a Parliament House reception. Taking advantage of having the PM's ear, Todd gave him a hearty pat on the back and asked, "What are the chances of getting our semi-autos back?" To which Mr Howard replied, "Buckleys, mate." So much for a career in lobbying.

Ron, who is used to dealing with some of the best shots in the country and who is a former national champion, was more than

impressed with Todd's shooting skills. "He's a helluva shot; he put me to shame," he said. "He pulled off some doozies on several foxes. One of the shots would have been just more than 350 metres."

After they had their fill of foxes and pigs, Ron got word of some rusa deer on a remote property - which turned into another first for Todd. He capped off his trip by taking his first rusa - a 28" buck. "Todd's not afraid to get his hands dirty," said Ron, who also shot his first deer during this trip. "He was more than willing to dress my deer as well as his own."

For Todd, this adventure sparked an interest in hunting more than just local ferals and fallow deer. He's now talking about hunting whitetail, chital and red deer and is even considering a trip to Canada next year to hunt black bear. After the experience of the mine disaster and rescue, a black bear should be no worries.

Since April of 2006, Todd's life has been turned upside down. "It's hard to live a normal life at the moment," he said. He's been travelling across the country for public appearances and speaking engagements and it's been challenging for him to spend time with Caroline, his wife of 13 years, and this three children, Trent (13), Madison (10) and Liam (6). He's gone from being just a



Michael's face lights up after shooting his first feral pig.

regular bloke to a very public figure. He's also undergone a personal transformation. "Before, I would rather spend time in the bush doing the 'guy thing' rather than the 'family thing'...but when you're in a situation where you don't think you're going to see family and friends again, it puts a whole different perspective on life. You sit back and look at it and realise family is more important than anything."

His new outlook is shared with Brant and it has inspired the two to establish the Russell Webb Legacy. The charity aims to assist disadvantaged youths in Beaconsfield and the surrounding communities in any way possible. Currently, they are in the process of determining how best to use the money that has already been raised.

Now one of Australia's most famous hunters, Todd has encountered what most of us only experience in our nightmares. He's cheated death and is now determined to make the most of his life - and for him that starts at home with his family and extends to the great Australian bush. ●

For more details on Todd's harrowing ordeal, check out the book *Bad Ground: Inside the Beaconsfield Mine Rescue* written by Tony Write and published by Murdoch Books.

To donate to the Trust Foundation - Russell Webb Legacy, visit www.trust.com.au/russell_webb_legacy or freecall 1800 650 358.



For Todd, this adventure sparked an interest in hunting more than just local ferals and fallow deer.