

Professor Frankie

It was a clear spring morning on Saturday 12th October 1963 in the inner Southeast suburbs of Brisbane. Thirteen year-old Frankie Robbins' mind was full of ideas as he walked a few doors up Prior Street to find Glen, his partner in weekend mischief. Old Rowie was watering the gravel road in front of his house as he did every morning. Frankie didn't know if it really was the dust Rowie was worried about or whether it just gave him the opportunity to spray Frankie and Glen when they passed on their bikes.

Rowie was an old World War One veteran and seemed cranky most of the time. He liked to come down and do odd jobs for Frankie's mother but once a month or so he would "get on the scooter" and wander down the street in the early hours yelling, "Up the Pope, Mrs. Robbins! Up the Pope!"

Frankie's mother seemed to ignore this and still offered to give Rowie and his dear old wife a lift to mass on Sunday evenings. Frankie thought this was a good thing because he believed it had saved Glen and him from jail once.

Rowie had called the cops one night after Frankie and Glen had bombarded his rooftop with green peaches. It was pretty scary for a while with blue lights flashing and all the neighbours peering out.

The cops came and asked Frankie and Glen about the peaches but no one had seen the boys near Rowie's house. Not even Rowie. The peaches just appeared out of the night sky. They never found the launcher. It was a huge sling-shot mounted on an abandoned large wooden cable spool – the kind used to transport copper cabling for underground telephone connections. By lying behind it and using the power of your legs to stretch the improvised inner tube, you sure could fire a peach a long way. Too far for the coppers to find anyway.

Rowie knew it was the boys but he couldn't explain how they could have done it. It was Mrs Rowe, in her Irish brogue, who said to the police, "Rowie's not exactly a saint in this you know." That shifted the focus of Rowie's mutterings and the police drove off.

"Good morning, Professor Frankie," Mrs. Latham said with a wide smile. "Glen will be out as soon as he finishes his homework."

"Good morning Mrs. Latham," Frankie replied.

Mrs. Latham liked Frankie in spite of his mischievous nature. She liked his quick intellect and he was always polite and well spoken. He was a good-looking boy with black hair and brown eyes. He must enjoy sport she thought, because he looks fit. He was a good companion for her Glen.

Frankie's friends called him 'the professor'. At first, he didn't like it much but he had become accustomed to it. The nickname came from Frankie's habit of

Professor.....2

constantly inventing things. Anything he learned at school would almost immediately become a suburban experiment.

Sometimes he used Glen and Glen's little brother Andy as his guinea pigs. Sometimes, if his confidence was high, he would try his new inventions himself.

Shortly, Glen appeared. Glen was a bit shorter than Frankie. Unlike Frankie, he had mousy coloured hair and freckles. He was slightly younger and it was noticeable.

"What are we doin' Frankie?"

"We're going down to the creek. I have something that will amaze you. I was thinking about warfare during history class this week and I realized that new technology has been the most important part of stunning victories. Hannibal had his elephants to beat the Romans and the Yanks blew the Japs out of the last war with the atom bomb," Frankie replied enthusiastically.

"What have you got Frankie, an elephant or a bomb?" Glen enquired incredulously.

"No, you whacko. I was just using them as examples," Frankie said disgustedly. "I've got this new weapon. Come and take a look."

"I hope it's better than your invention last weekend," Glen said laughing.

"That seat belt on the billy cart was fine; it was just that the cart lacked stability. We had a seat belt on our cart before most new cars, Glen," Frankie said defiantly.

"Yeah. Well you didn't seem to like the seat belt when you flipped the cart halfway down that big hill," Glen said challenging Frankie's logic.

"Here, look at this," Frankie said proudly.

"Looks like a stick to me," Glen said looking bored.

"Yeah, but not just any stick. This is a carefully selected piece of cedar cut exactly 750millimetres long and 19mm thick at the big end."

"So what?"

"Bend it. Feel the potential energy it has?" Frankie was excited.

"The what?"

"Here, dumbbo. Watch this." Frankie reached into the clay on the creek's edge and stuck a piece of mud onto the end of his weapon. He leaned back and flung the missile in a high arc into the sky. It sailed a full sixty metres before hitting the ground with a delightfully loud splat.

"Wow!" Glen exclaimed. "How did you do that?"

"It's done by mechanical advantage – it's a kind of ballistics."

"What?"

"It's physics, Glen. Don't you learn that at school?"

"Huh? We don't pelt mud balls in our class."

"Never mind. Just leave the thinking to me," Frankie said in his most patronizing voice.

"Now, when the Weller's Hill gang come over this afternoon we'll be at the creek. They will think they have the advantage up on the ridge as we peg rocks and clods at each other. But we will have this secret weapon. They will

Professor.....3

think they are out of range but if we open fire early enough, we will be out of their range," Frankie explained confidently.

"But we always stay out of each other's range," Glen said.

"Not today, Glen. Not today," Frankie said smiling. "Now. You need some practice. It's all in the consistency of the clay. Too soggy and it will come off the swing too soon and too sticky and it will come off too late."

Glen moved into the practice session grinning broadly. On his first attempt the projectile fell back over his shoulder.

"No, no. Too gooey," advised the professor.

The next missile landed a meter in front of them.

"Glen, you didn't listen to me. Here, feel this mud ball – it's about right."

"Ah! Now I'm getting some distance," said Glen with rising excitement.

"Keep going, this is a matter of skill," Frankie said trying to sound like his school's headmaster.

"Say Frankie, why don't we wrap a small sharp stone inside the mud ball? Then it would be sorta like a dum-dum that Grandpa used to talk about."

"Illicit projectiles contravene the Geneva Convention, Glen" Frankie explained officiously.

"The what?"

"The Geneva Convention last reviewed in 1949. It outlines the rules for humanitarian behavior in war."

"You mean wars have rules? How can that be?"

"Of course. Soldiers have to stick to the rules."

"But in the movies, they use bayonets. That must be against those rules," said Glen looking confused.

"No, bayonets are OK."

"What? Sticking someone through the gizzards with a bayonet?"

"No, that's fine. So long as you don't bayonet any civilians it's OK"

"I don't get it. I think you're making this up."

"No way! Check it out in the encyclopaedia."

"Well I reckon a little stone in a mud ball is not as bad as spearing someone with a bayonet. How come my ideas always get ignored? Where is Geneva anyway?"

"No dum-dums! Your father would be disgusted if he thought you were prepared to contravene the Geneva Convention."

"I reckon you're wrong about that. Grandpa never said anything about rules when he was in the war."

"Look. I've got this all worked out. If you start trying to change the mass of the projectile, you'll lose efficiency. Let's just stick to the plan," said Frankie with an air of finality.

"Yeah. OK. I'm gonna ask Grandpa though the next time I see him."

The confrontation with the Weller's Hill gang lasted barely ten minutes. Faced with a fusillade of mud balls launched from an incredible distance, the motley group disappeared back over the ridge.

Professor.....4

"There," cried Frankie. "A stunning victory that caught the enemy by complete surprise! Let's go back to our tree house and celebrate from our jar of chocolate chip biscuits."

Glen was first into the tree house. "They're not here Frankie. Someone's pinched 'em. Someone in that gang must have outflanked us," lamented Glen.

"Impossible! They never got past the crown of the ridge," Frankie declared. "Somebody else has been here."

"That doesn't sound right. No kids around here would be game to pinch our stuff," Glen said. "We're the kings of this neighbourhood."

Frankie and Glen conducted a forensic investigation to try to find who had nicked their supply. They didn't unravel the mystery until the next morning.

“Did you see that, Frankie?” Glen asked unnecessarily. “Rowie is watering his patch and he didn’t try to spray as we rode past. He’s never waved and smiled at us before. He must be sick.”

“If he is sick, I know why,” Frankie said looking dejected. “Did you see the handful of chocolate chip biscuits he was munching on?”