

THE TOE CUTTERS

*The True Story of the Men Who
Terrorised Australia's Underworld*

BEN SCOTT

PART ONE

The Trade

CHAPTER 1

The Lunch Break

"Don't let's turn robbery into murder."

Baldy Blair

GUILDFORD, MARCH 1970

At about half past twelve on Wednesday 4 March 1970, Baldy Blair was crouched behind an armoured van in a bank car park at Guildford, in the western suburbs of Sydney, waiting for a guard to throw out his lunch.

It was a sweltering day. The van belonged to Mayne Nickless, and it had pulled into the car park beside the Commonwealth Bank at about twenty to twelve, as it did every day, so that the three guards inside could eat before they made their delivery to the bank. It was a metal box with no air conditioning, and the men inside it had been sitting in the heat for the best part of an hour. Behind it, out of sight of the windows, three men in dust coats and cloth caps were squatting on the bitumen. All three were wearing sunglasses. Blair was thirty-four, a bank robber who had moved up from the Melbourne waterfront a few years before. Beside him were two men from Melbourne, Stephen Nittes, a former lightweight boxer, and Alan Jones, a quiet man of twenty-nine whom nobody would remember.

They knew the door would open, because it always did. The guards on this run were tidy men. When they had finished eating, one of them always opened the back door to put the rubbish out.

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The door opened. Three silenced pistols came up at the guard standing in it, and the robbers told all three guards to let them in “or else they’d blow their f***ing heads off”. Blair had a phrase he used at moments like this, his stepson, Larry, remembered. “Don’t let’s turn robbery into murder.”

Nobody fired, and nobody needed to. The guards had no time to get their own pistols out of their holsters. They were ordered to lie down on the floor of the van or be shot, and two of the robbers climbed in, tied them up with rope and taped their mouths shut. Then they unloaded the money. It was in twenty-four green canvas sacks, each one stamped RESERVE BANK in black capitals, and the sacks went out of the back of the van and into the getaway car. The only violence anybody recorded that day was a pair of broken glasses. The van still had several banks to visit that afternoon, so it was carrying less than it would have later in the day.

It was carrying enough. The sacks held \$587,890. It was the largest armed robbery Australia had ever seen. Nobody in the country had ever robbed an armoured van before. Mayne Nickless had built a van that nobody could get into, and at Guildford the men inside had opened it themselves, to put the lunch wrappers out.

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Guildford was a working suburb in the spread of houses and factories around Parramatta. Lieutenant Samuel North had named the place in 1837 after his friend the Earl of Guildford, but the suburb that took the name grew up later, around the railway station. People cashed their wages there and did their banking there, and never gave a thought to what came and went in the vans.

The job made sense because Australia was still paid in cash. On pay day the pay man came round the factory floor or the building site and the workers lined up. Each of them was handed an envelope with his week’s money in notes and coins and the sums printed on the

front. Somebody had to get that money from the banks to the factories, and the banks had to get it from somewhere first. Every week, in every city in the country, armoured vans carried the wages of whole suburbs through ordinary streets.

Mayne Nickless had started in Melbourne in 1886 as a parcel service run by John Mayne and Enoch Nickless, with ten horse-drawn vans, and it had grown into the biggest carrier of cash in Australia. In June 1977 one of its directors, J. F. Ashby, explained what that meant to a seminar on armed robbery in Canberra. "It may surprise some of you to know that on some days of the week 85% of all cash handled in Australia goes through the Mayne Nickless system alone," he said. The company served eighty per cent of the bank branches in the country's capital and provincial cities. Every week, he said, "thousands of separate amounts of cash are delivered to thousands of separate locations", and every one of them was a potential target. Each van carried three men. "A standard car crew of three men has been the Mayne Nickless practice for many years."

The police who had to deal with armed robbery said at the same seminar that it had become a serious problem only recently. Paul Delianis, the detective inspector in charge of the Armed Robbery Squad in Victoria, told the meeting that in parts of Australia robbery under arms "commenced to be a major problem from about the mid-sixties, particularly in Sydney and in Melbourne". New South Wales had formed its Armed Hold-up Squad in the late 1960s, and Victoria followed. In 1965 Delianis's state had recorded seventeen major armed robberies. In 1970 it recorded a hundred and forty-four.

The record for a single robbery had been set in Melbourne. A year before Guildford, bandits took \$136,400 from Mayne Nickless guards as they wheeled cash from a bank to their van at the Chadstone shopping centre. The money had been on the footpath. Nobody had yet taken it from inside a van.

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The police put every detective they could spare on it, among them Detective Sergeant Noel Morey and his young partner, Roger Rogerson.

The detectives had witnesses. Three guards had looked the robbers in the face from a few feet away, and they were interviewed again and again. None of them could pick out a single man. The robbers had worn mirrored sunglasses and hats, and that had been half the plan.

The other half was the rubbish. The man who planned the job never went near the car park. The newspapers later named him as Leslie Woon, a criminal whom police reports called "one of the most brilliant, cunning and meticulous criminals" to operate in the country. He had found out that the guards on that run always ate their lunch in the same place, and that while they ate, the cash sat behind a door that would sooner or later be opened from the inside. He did not need to break into anything. He only had to wait for the rubbish.

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The money went home with the robbers. Blair, Nittes and Jones took about ninety thousand dollars each. The planner took the lion's share, about half, and he took it, Larry was told, "on behalf of the Painters and Dockers". Much of that, the boy heard, went to Billy Longley, the hard man the Melbourne docks called the Texan. A slice went to the Mayne Nickless man on the inside who had tipped them off.

It was a Melbourne job done in Sydney. The robbers were painters and dockers, members of the Federated Ship Painters and Dockers Union, which on the Melbourne waterfront was a union of hard men scraping and painting the hulls of ships for poor money, with a criminal seam running all the way through it. The dust coats made a kind of sense. For painters and dockers they were everyday work clothes. Sydney men and Melbourne men worked together when there was money in it, but each city kept its own underworld, and alliances could break, especially when large sums of money were involved.

Guildford would cross that border more than once before it was finished.

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The robbers knew they would have the authorities hot on their heels. But there was another very real danger when it came to armed robbery.

A bank can report a theft. A man holding the proceeds of one cannot. If his share is taken from him, there is no policeman to ring, no court to go to and no insurer to pay up. On the morning of 4 March the money in those sacks belonged to the Reserve Bank. By lunchtime it belonged to three men who could never admit to having it, and that made it the easiest money in Sydney to steal.

The guards could not identify anyone, but on the beachfront at Coogee everybody knew who had the money. Blair held court at the Oceanic Hotel there, on the broad concrete terrace at the top of its front steps, where his friends met him every afternoon to drink and talk business. Some of the men on those steps were his friends. Some of them were already thinking about his share.

One of them was Kevin Gore. He was a former merchant seaman and a safecracker, a regular on the terrace, and so close to the family that he would later marry into their circle. He was known as an expert with an oxy-acetylene torch, the kind of cutting flame safecrackers used to burn through steel. A man who could cut his way into a safe could think of other things to do with a flame. He and Blair had sat on the same steps for years. In the months after Guildford, Gore and a few of his friends went into a new line of business, and Blair's share was the first thing on their list.

Larry was eleven in 1970. Years later he wrote that Baldy was the only father he had ever known, and he remembered the men who came to the house and sat on the Oceanic steps, and which of them

laughed at his jokes. He knew how it had ended. "With friends like Dad's," he said, "who needs enemies?"

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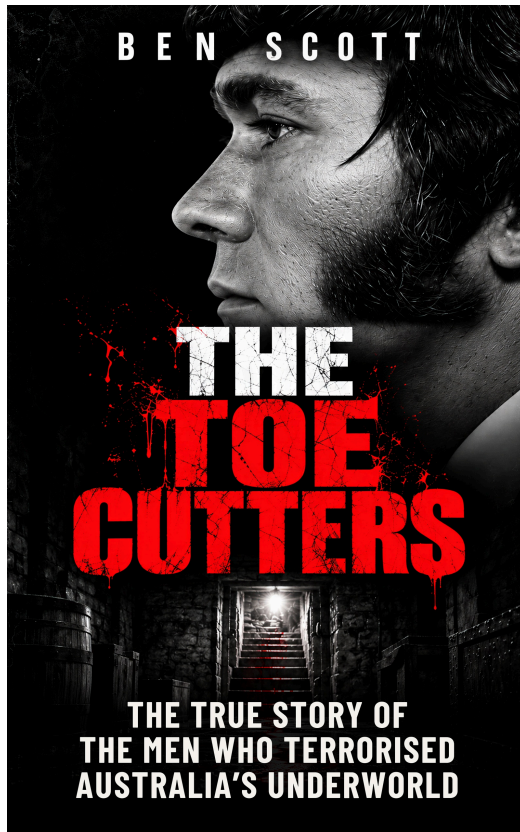
The men who hunted the Guildford money had a name, and in time the dictionaries would use it. In Australian underworld slang a toe-cutter is a criminal who preys on other criminals, the ones who have just come into money. The name promised worse. It said the money was got out of a man one toe at a time, with bolt cutters, until he told you where it was. Australia already had a word for the trade. A standover man took money from illegal casinos and brothels in return for leaving them alone, and for keeping others off them. A slang dictionary of 1986 defined a toecutter as a standover man who chops people's feet off "to indicate, in a jovial fashion, that they have rather stepped out of line". A man who had heard the stories did not wait to find out whether they were true. He paid.

When a New South Wales coroner looked back on it half a century later, at the inquest into a man who vanished in 1972, she described the Toe Cutters as "a Sydney criminal gang whose modus operandi was extortion of money from other known criminals". It was a tax. It was levied on men who could not complain, and it was collected by men who knew exactly where to look, because they drank on the same steps.

The earliest use of the word in print that the lexicographers have found is not in a Sydney paper at all. It is in the Calgary Herald, in Alberta, on 26 April 1974. The paper had to explain to Canadian readers who the Toecutters were. They had, it said, "gained notoriety by torturing members of a gang which held up an armored car in Sydney in 1970".

By the time Alberta read about them, one of the three men behind the van at Guildford had vanished and was never seen again. The other two had been caught. Two of the men who were said to have

hunted them were dead or missing, and another was hiding in Melbourne under a false name. None of it was new. Sydney had been robbing its robbers for forty years.



The story continues in seventeen more chapters.

The Toe Cutters by Ben Scott

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