

The Flying Doctor, by Dave Baldwin

A book review and interview combined

I THOUGHT I was going to be reading something like Barry Crump with wings. While it could be described that way - it is a cracking good read - *The Flying Doctor* has depth that elevates it beyond a simple, feel good, biography. Tag lined with: the adventures of a bush pilot, hunter and backcountry Doctor, you know the book is going to cover a lot of ground. I dare to suggest that the publishers must have loved it, coming with three built-in target audience populations. It's the tale of a laconic, 'lucky bastard', who's had some rough times mixed with his good and who has a heck of a story to tell.

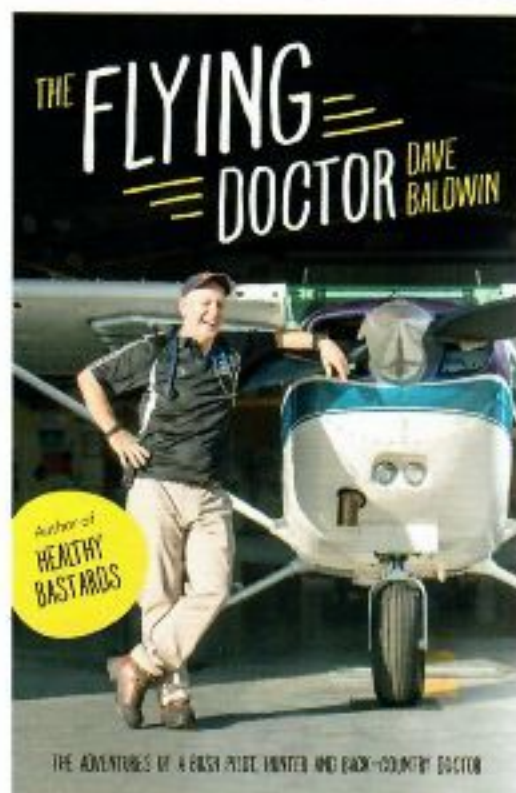
Dave Baldwin wrote the best-selling *Healthy Bastards*, a book aimed at getting Kiwi males to take better care of their health. That book grew out of his column 'What's up Doc' in *Pacific Wings*. This book came about because, he tells me, "Random House asked for it." They seemed to have noticed that he had a way with words and a heap of stories to tell.

Dave Baldwin is well known to pilots throughout the lower two thirds of the

country. He's the doctor, who in his specially fitted out Cessna 172, ZK-Really-Jolly-Good, flies into back-country strips to give the pilots who work out of them their medicals. It's a win/win for both sides. In Dave's words, "After performing one or two medicals for mates, and mates of mates, in the Deep South, it occurred to me that there was... nothing stopping a ruggedly handsome, intrepid and dazzlingly entrepreneurial individual flying into an airstrip and performing aviation medicals in suitably equipped premises nearby."

"The idea was that I would spend much of my time gadding about the landscape visiting remote localities where assorted characters and legends of the bush and mountain aviation scene would form orderly queues for my services. While I was in these localities, it would be remiss of me not to check out the hunting."

You can tell by the style of that paragraph that this book is very easy reading. However, if you're offended by the following sentence then the book might not be for you. *"Even those who are born to plant kisses on the arses of others - you know*



The Flying Doctor by Dave Baldwin, published by Random House NZ, RRP: \$40

who you are - struggle to enjoy conferences." This is in the chapter where he describes meeting a GP, at the above mentioned medical conference, and seeing a man who

A Flying Doctor extract

THIS book is filled with great adventures and great humour, but there's also a serious and frequently compassionate undertone. Here's a Doctoring related extract I like which covers that aspect quite nicely:

Around this time, I was rostered on one evening as the emergency duty doctor for the region. Early on I got a call from the Queenstown Police saying a trumper had suffered an emergency up on the Routeburn Track and, as it was in my patch, could I shoot up there and sort things out. They thought he might be dead. One of the practice nurses and I immediately drove to the airstrip where a chopper was waiting for us, and it buzzed us off up into the hills. The pilot set us down near a little tarn on a ridge beneath the frowning Humboldt Mountains. We grabbed our emergency gear and scuttled up the track for 10 minutes to the point where the trumper was lying, surrounded by a few members of his family and a worried-looking warden from the hut a kilometre further on.

As I examined the patient - he was a slightly built man in his seventies, cool to the touch, and had no vital signs at all - they told me that he was a University Professor who had lately retired.

This trip to walk the Routeburn was his retirement present to himself. He had been slow on this section of the track, and had finally told his companions that he was a bit puffed and that they should go on ahead of him. He reckoned he would sit down and smoke a pipe and catch them up at the hut. They did as he asked.

The Professor had walked a short distance off the track, sat down, loaded his pipe and lit up, then keeled over. When he failed to arrive at the hut, his family had gone looking and found him, his pipe still clutched in his hand, where he had toppled gently off his perch into the tussock.

We couldn't carry him down to the chopper without a stretcher, so the nurse and the hut warden volunteered to go back for it.

The dead man's family took their tearful leave of the deceased and walked back off towards the hut, leaving me alone with him for a quarter hour. I sat beside him and looked around appreciatively. It was a section of the track where the pale green foliage of the ribbonwood trees makes it look like a stonefruit orchard, hence its name, The Orchard. On the margins of the valley, the ribbonwoods give over to beech that climb the steep walls; that day the sky was colouring up behind the mighty, snowcapped Darrans, which presided over the whole scene from the opposite side of the Hollyford Valley.

It occurred to me that none of the Professor's family or friends had been too upset, and I could see why. He had lived a long, successful and fulfilling life, and his last moments had been spent at peace in one of the most beautiful places on earth, knowing his family were nearby, safe and happy and perfectly untroubled by his onrushing end. No mouldering away in a rest home for him, and none of the grisly interventions of end-of-life medical care.

"That's the way, mate," I told him softly, and I knew it was true. That's the way I want to go, too.



was living something very close to Dave's dream life.

Before the flying tales comes the inspiring story of a young lad; Dave was a self-described 'ding bat' who struggled with school and was probably dyslexic. He would really rather be outside in the hills, but Dave decided that he did want to go to university (and not just because it would please his mother) so he started on a science degree. Dave had to 'translate' all his notes and text books into what he called 'Dave Speel' (that is the way he spells it), a code of his own that he could actually understand and use to study. It was much harder for him than his peers but he found that he was holding his own and enjoying himself. He was partly joking when he suggested to a friend that he was going to be a Doctor, but when the friend took him seriously; "Bugger me, I thought. He actually thinks I can do it."

"Self-confidence counts for so much and after that little conversation I decided, yup, by hook or by crook I was going to be a Doctor of Medicine! Bring it on baby!"

And he did. Through all the years of studying and training, he was also getting married, starting a family, and hunting. This is a story about family and family bonds. Dave's mother Granny Olive was an avid hunter too, taking Dave and his brother out when they were small and later becoming part of Dave's "Gang of Three," Dave, his Mum and his son Marc who shared many high-country escapades together. The father and son relationship, which was so much closer to brotherhood, Dave told me, is the backbone of the story. The two were very close, and Marc's suicide at age 24 could have broken his father. Dave is not broken. "I swore I wouldn't do a runner. That I wouldn't denigrate what we did together." He still has a relationship with his son, and sharing the tales of the time the two of them did have together has been a way of honouring their bond. "Because Marc and I had this relationship," Dave said. "I feel a presence. All the time. I wrote this to celebrate us both and all our mad friends."

Some 400 of the 'mad friends' were present for the book launch, in The Marc Baldwin Aerospace Research Centre, the hangar that is the home of the Bulls Flying Doctor Service. It's one of Dave's favourite places.

In sharing his love of hunting, flying and family Dave is also sliding in a large, but subtle message. It follows on from Healthy Bastards, and it is about the bigger picture of what it means to be healthy. "The key," he said, [of writing the book] "was being able to redefine, in my mind, what is a healthy bastard. What is health?" I was speaking to Dave on the phone, trying to catch what he was telling me as words poured out of him. "I'm a GP. I see people at all levels of health. And some of them are ding bats. But the ones I work with who are really healthy, well, there's another dimension to it. The really healthy ones are the ones who see that there is another level. Most are free spirits. Most have a view beyond the physical world. They look after more than just their physical health. The people that I deal with [through the Flying Doctor service] realise how insignificant they are, how wonderful the world is." Dave laughed. "Pilots get it; sailors, mountain climbers, motorbike riders at one with the road, those people get it. I want other people to realise that, to get out in the world and see beyond themselves."

I asked Dave if he was pleased with the book. "Oh absolutely. I'm rapt with the finished product. I think it's very readable and it has important messages. Things like the way I started out as a 'ding bat' but I learnt how to learn. I did have a highly motivated mother. She kept at me. She was so pleased when I went to Med School." It was also Dave's mountain climbing mother who opened his eyes to the outside world that turned into a spiritual connection.



At the hangar, books in hand.



Happy times with Marc.



Dr. Dave and ZK-ReallyJolly-Good on location.



Doing the rounds.

The main excerpt that I've chosen to illustrate the book (see sidebar) could be seen as dark, but to me it encapsulates my view of Dave. He was a young General Practitioner in training, based briefly in Te Anau, when called out to a sick man on the Routeburn Track. The man had passed away and Dave the Doctor could do nothing for him, but Dave the outdoor man, with his own great love of mountains could sit with him and see the manner of his passing as a blessing.

This book will make you laugh, and it may very well bring you to tears. Recommended for: pilots, hunters, outdoors lovers, fathers, sons and all those who love them. A great holiday read.

Here are a few other random, and shorter excerpts from the book:

In discussing his school days.

"If you're amongst people who are convinced they're no-hopers, you don't have a hope; but if you're among people who want and expect to achieve and are prepared to work to do it, you're likely to get carried along for the ride."

Dissection at Med School.

"It gave me a huge respect for the human body, but it also impressed on me the notion that for all its incredible complexity, our body is just a machine in the end, like a car. But unlike a car, you only get one, and you've got to look after it properly. Once you've crashed it, or allowed it

to fall apart through poor maintenance, that's it. You don't get another."

The birth of his first child.

"Pregnancy and parenthood, as we discovered, are very much you-have-to-have-been-there experiences, like other natural disasters, or war."

Attempting a CPL.

"After hunting, my passion was still flying. I decided in 1989 I would press on and get my commercial pilot's licence which would enable me to fly passengers and freight for reward. Even if this didn't work out, I figured it would make me a better pilot."

His mother and her dress code in camp.

"She herself, though, wasn't so easily identified or categorised. In hot weather, she had no qualms about stripping down to her rather unsightly bra and pants, and she would move about the camp humming happily to herself in this state of advanced undress."

'Granny Olive,' Marc asked once. 'Do you know you've got a hole in your undies?'

'Oh yes,' she replied cheerfully. 'That's just to let the gas out, dear.'"

In talking about where to set up Not-So-Royal-Flying-Doctor satellite bases.

"I'll admit our selection process incorporated a strong bias towards the rugged, picturesque and deer-infested parts of the country."

What working in the back blocks is like.

"I reckon the dodgiest place I ever did a pilot medical was in a chicken coop up near the Rakaia River. It really was one to remember: I had this bloke laid out on a bench amongst the nest boxes while I did an echocardiogram (ECG), as a few dozen chooks clucked and flapped and eyed the machine's little screen curiously. Every now and then I had to brush one of the cloud of feathers flying around the place off the equipment. Despite chook poo on his clothes, the client was grateful because I'd managed to squeeze his urgent medical into my already frantic schedule."

And a last word from Dave.

"There's not a day goes by when I don't give thanks for [Marc's] part in my journey. Whether people realise it or not, that's what it's all about; the journey. We get to share it with others; some you choose, some you don't. If you're as lucky as me, you get to share it with some really good bastards. There's no telling how long their journey will intersect with yours, so the thing is to enjoy the ride while it lasts."

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