

On the set of Mad Men + Behind the Ben Cousins doco + Oprah comes Down Under

inside edition



Finding Andrew

One man's extraordinary three-year journey to track down his beloved son >>p122



Long, lonely road to

FROZEN REMINDERS

Photos that kept Ken going



An Australian's extraordinary journey to locate his missing son has taken an amazing turn, writes **Janet Fife-Yeomans**

KEN Thompson rode into the German city of Stuttgart two weeks ago on Father's Day, September 5.

On the back of his bike was a tent and a stuffed doll with a wide grin and a yellow firefighter's hat on his head.

His son Andrew's favourite toy had been Ken's only constant companion on the lonely odyssey that had taken him 6272km across Europe. Cycling about 100km a day, sleeping rough in his tent most nights, Ken would charge up his mobile phone and laptop in cafes while having a meal.

They were his lifeline to Team Andrew, a loose collection of people back home in Sydney and a private detective in Hong Kong. They kept his website going, his blog up-to-date, gave him support and traced the origin of people who logged on, especially when there was a cluster of hits from one region, one country. The computers' digital fingerprints, their IP addresses, allowed the team to track where they were from but not who they were.

The thought, the hope, was that Ken's estranged wife Melinda would not be able to resist logging in to see if Ken was getting close. This was the third Father's Day since she had grabbed Andrew, then three-and-a-half, in the middle of a custody fight.

She had boarded a Singapore Airlines flight to Frankfurt and to life as an international fugitive.

On this Sunday, Ken fired up his laptop and clicked on his email. Among the messages was an anonymous email from a hotmail address.

A woman in Amsterdam thought she had found Andrew. In its timing, on Father's Day, Ken thought it was a hoax.

■■■■ Custody battles, divorce proceedings: they are a lot like marriages. Complex, intimate, often unfathomable. Only those personally involved in them know what is really going on.

Outsiders become involved at their peril or because they have to when the situation turns nasty and ends up in a

courtroom. Melinda Thompson (nee Stratton) worked in Australia as a successful businesswoman as international product manager for a medical company. She has an MBA, has lived in Germany, France and Dubai and speaks fluent French and German. She comes from Sydney's northern suburbs and her brother John is chief investment officer with insurance giant IAG.

Ken Thompson was deputy commissioner with the NSW Fire Brigades when the couple married. They travelled through Europe for three months and, about two years into their marriage, at the age of 42, Melinda became pregnant. Ken thought everything was fine and his marriage was happy.

Then, in December 2007, Melinda walked out. Ken says he didn't see it coming. By April 2008, their

In its timing, on Father's Day, Ken thought it was a hoax

custody case had made it on to the Family Court calendar although it was still awaiting a trial date. Andrew lived with his mum and Ken had access three times a week.

After mother and son fled, the court lifted its reporting restrictions to allow Ken to launch what became an international crusade to track Andrew down. The court also allowed him to reveal that just before Melinda disappeared, a psychiatric report found she was suffering from a mental condition that affected her judgment and her ability to parent effectively.

It said she placed undue or inappropriate weight on beliefs she had formed, such as believing Ken was sexually abusing their son. He strenuously denies this and has a letter from the NSW Department of Community



Services' Joint Investigation Response Team that says he has no case to answer. "As you are aware, information was reported to DOCS regarding your son and Andrew was interviewed as a result of this interview," the letter says. "The police are suspending this matter... and DOCS/JIRT are closing this case [and] will not be having further contact with your family."

Melinda's lawyer, Clayton Long, says that while Ken was given dispensation by the court to talk about Andrew, Melinda and her family were not.

"He's not gagged, we are," Clayton says. The only word from Melinda came in a letter in January last year to *The Australian* newspaper in which she said she has "no

mental problems whatsoever". She says the reason she ran was because the court was biased against mothers and, despite spending \$30,000 on legal fees, she did not think she would get a fair hearing.

■■■■ Andrew Thompson was one of 136 children stolen from Australia by one of their parents in 2008; 100 were returned under the terms of the Hague Convention on child abduction, which requires signature countries to immediately return abducted children and any further custody hearings are heard in their home country.

The sad figures have remained almost constant since the early 1990s when they doubled in four years to reach 149 in 1994.

By 1994, Dianne Smith got her son John home with her in



see my boy's smile



Ken Thompson's odyssey

1. April 24, 2008: Andrew is taken from Australia by his mother, Melinda Margaret Stratton. They fly from Sydney to Europe on a Singapore Airlines flight. Both are Australian citizens travelling on Australian passports
2. May 13, 2010 (Days 1-3): Ken leaves Australia on cycling mission. Travels to Hong Kong/Kowloon then on to London. Ride to Colnbrook to Oxford, South East England
3. May 18 & 19 (Days 4-5): Oxford to Banbury to Princethorpe
4. May 20 (Day 6): Princethorpe to Leicester to London to Colnbrook
5. May 25 (Day 12): Launch of International Missing Children's Day
6. May 27 & 28 (Days 14-15): London to Winchester
7. May 29 & 30 (Days 16-17): Winchester to Salisbury to Bournemouth
8. May 30-June 1 (Days 18-20): Bournemouth to Isle of Wight to Littlehampton to Eastbourne
9. June 2 & 3 (Days 21-22): Eastbourne to Hamlet of Collier Street (near Tonbridge) to Dover
10. June 4 & 5 (Days 23-24): Dover to Dunkirk (France) to Diksmuide (Belgium)
11. June 6-11 (Days 25-30): Diksmuide to Waterloo
12. June 12-14 (Days 31-33): Waterloo to Echternach (Luxembourg)
13. June 15-16 (Days 34-35): Echternach to Traben-Trarbach (Germany)
14. June 17-18 (Days 36-37): Traben-Trarbach to Cochem
15. June 20-22 (Days 39-41): Cochem to Koblenz to Rudesheim
16. June 23-30 (Days 42-49): Rudesheim to Harheim (Frankfurt) then heading north
17. July 1-4 (Days 50-53): Bad Breisig to Rijnwaarden (The Netherlands)
18. July 5-12 (Days 54-61): The Netherlands-Germany-Amsterdam-The Netherlands
19. July 13-18 (Days 62-67): Amsterdam
20. July 19-21 (Days 68-69): Amsterdam to The Hague
21. July 26 (Day 75): Meeting with the First Secretary - The Permanent Bureau, Den Haag (The Hague)
22. July 26-30 (Days 71 to 79): The Hague to Schoorl to Harlingen to Groningen
23. July 31 (Day 80): The Netherlands back into Germany
24. August 1-5 (Days 81 to 85): Bremerhaven to Hamburg
25. August 7-8 (Days 86-87) Lubeck
26. August 8-11 (Days 88 to 91): Lubeck to Berlin
27. August 12-14 (Days 92 to 94): Berlin
28. August 15 to 20 (Days 95 to 100): Berlin to Priebus (Poland)
29. August 21-27 (Days 101 to 107): Priebus to Prague (Czech Republic)
30. August 28-September 4 (Days 108 to 115): Prague to Nuremberg
31. September 5-7 (Days 116-118): Nuremberg to Stuttgart

highlighted their rights. He had given up his job to concentrate on his crusade and along the way there had been several leads, all of which led nowhere.

In Stuttgart, he furiously fired back an email to the mystery woman. Who was she, where was she? Word came back that she was a schoolteacher who had become suspicious of the new boy and, Googling missing children, recognised Andrew.

She was in Amsterdam and had already contacted Dutch police, forwarding their details to Ken. He took his bike and got the fastest train he could find to Amsterdam.

If the past two-and-a-half years had been tough, they were nothing compared to the next agonising hours. He arrived on a Sunday and knowing his son may be close by, he had to wait until the next morning to talk to Dutch prosecutor Otto Van Der Bijl.

Staying with friends he had met through his travels, Ken was finally, tentatively, reunited with Andrew last Monday. With the same gap-tooth smile as his dad, father and son played games for 40 minutes under the gaze of specialist psychiatrists.

But with his mother in jail, where she can be held for 45 days without charge as she awaits extradition hearings for contempt of the Family Court which she may yet fight, Andrew is with other children in the care of with Dutch caseworkers. The journeys of mother, father and son are not over yet.

"This is going to be the hard part. Riding the bicycle was easy," he says.

Melinda may have visiting rights to her son in jail.

"It's not about me, it's not about Melinda, it's about Andrew. If they feel he is fretting because he's not seeing his mother then, you know, I can't get in the way of that," says Ken.

"But my concern is that I am in a process at the moment of re-establishing my relationship with Andrew and he probably needs to focus a little bit on me."



Sydney — 20 years after he was abducted by his UK-born father as a three-month-old and taken to England.

In the days before the Family Court and the Hague Convention, Dianne secured an urgent Supreme Court injunction and immigration officials were waiting for father and son when they landed in London but there was nothing they could do. Her attempt to

Back home: Sisters Page and Kelsey Conway

try to reconcile with her husband for their son's sake ended in a breakdown. She returned to Sydney beaten.

She lost touch with John, remarried and had four more children. Then one day when she answered the phone in 1993, it was her son.

He is now 37, living in Australia and after initially calling her Di, he now calls her Mum. Looking back over the 20 missing years, Dianne says Ken is lucky he has found his son relatively quickly.

"There's a lot of scarring and we have had lots of long talks. His father had told him that I left because I didn't want him. But I'm so proud of John," she says.

She has admiration for Ken Thompson's determination.

"It will be tough for a short time with him and his son but his son is young enough to

rebuild his life," she says.

Topaz Conway's two daughters were stolen away in America during a custody visit with their American-born father. It was nine months and a marathon legal battle before she saw them again, handed over at a fast food restaurant next to a Seattle highway.

Topaz says it's important neither Ken nor his estranged wife let their son hate either of them.

Her daughter Kelsey is now 26, her sister Page 23.

It is 15 years since she got them home and there have been problems.

"It was not until a few years later when they were older that I explained to them everything that had gone on," says Topaz.

"I didn't want them to feel they were in the middle of

our fight. The girls had to make up their own minds and as adults they have.

"This experience had an amazing affect on our relationship and brought the girls and I closer together.

"Children are quite resilient and it's about how much we love them and try not to manipulate them for our ends," she says.

Ken Thompson became a public figure during his 118 days cycling across Europe's highways, wearing an increasingly faded picture of his son on his back. Newspapers, magazines and TV stations were happy to give him the publicity he needed as he highlighted not only Andrew's plight but raised awareness of children caught up in a tug-of-war between their parents everywhere and

