

AN ACT OF VALOR, OR JUST BLIND INSTINCT

By Tony Melbourne

Back last February, during one of our particularly hot spells, Jeanette and I were taking turns to mist spray our birds. Whilst enjoying the air conditioned comfort of my office I was attracted by a call to come quickly to the aviaries. I did not have to be told what the trouble was; I knew it would be a visit from some unwanted brown snake.

We hadn't had the pleasure of a snake's company so far this year, but after hot bursts of weather we can usually rely on a visit. So arming myself with my trusty fish spear, it's about eight foot long in the old measurement, I don't really like to get too close, I proceeded to the aviaries.

There, in the Superb's aviary, was the unwelcome visitor, coiled up in the shade about three-quarters of the way down the length of the aviary. As the aviary is just over fourteen feet long I could easily reach my friend without entering the aviary. So reaching in I gave him a bit of a dig and he took off like an Olympic runner, completing two laps of the cage in record time, while I closed the door at a similar rate.

He pulled up about half way down the aviary and seemed to not be fully aware of what had happened. However, he was now alert with his head raised about four inches off the ground and looking around to see what might happen next. There are other inhabitants in the aviary and stepping forward was a King Quail chick about four days old. As the chick walked towards the snake I thought to myself, well there's afternoon tea. Enter the male King Quail, head down, wings spread and adopting the stance of a fighting cock. With out fear the father ran between the chick and the snake and eyeballed the aggressor.

For a moment I thought the Quail was about to peck the snake in the eye, but both just held their ground. It was a bit like the stand off at the OK Corral, both waiting for the first move. Well I made the move and tapped the ground behind the snake and he moved quickly to the front of the aviary. The King Quail now backed his hen and four children into the back corner of the aviary, still adopting the pose of a fighting cock, and never taking his eyes of the snake.

Now in closer reach the snake was disposed of and peace returned to the aviary, and the quail went about their business as though nothing had happened. Reflecting on the event I can only admire the cock's bravery in face of adversity and wondered what award he should be given. He did not qualify for the Victoria Cross. I made this decision based the battle of Rorkes Drift, as depicted in the film "Zulu". Those who saw the film may have wondered why Colour Sergeant Vaughan was not awarded a V.C., but he was deemed to be only doing his duty. So on those grounds, the quail missed out. He was not bitten, so no Purple Heart, leaving him with the prospect of either a Military Medal or a Mention in Dispatches.

On further thought, and as he came from a long line of aviary-bred quail and had never seen a snake before, I pondered was this an act of valour, or just blind instinct to protect his family. I find it amazing that aviary-bred birds immediately recognise danger from animals, reptiles or birds of prey they have never encountered before, but know they are a danger. Parent birds will, at times, without consideration for their own safety, put life and limb on the line in defence of their offspring.

So considering all that had taken place, there had to be some reward for courage in the face of a very nasty enemy, so it was settled with a handful of mealworms which were devoured in record time. As I am not partial to snakes either, I adjourned for a cold beer.