

She's Got The Gun

On the morning of the 9th of July, Anderson, Bidner, Schuler and Groth rose at dawn and breakfasted on hot coffee and leftover potatoes in their jackets, before setting off together with an air of expectation. The river was still knee deep in parts and the men removed their boots and slung them over their shoulders to wade across, chatting as they sock dried their feet and replaced their boots on the other side. Then they walked downstream several hundred metres, crossing a couple of likely looking gullies along the way, before breaking away from the main river and heading up and over a gentle ridgeline. At the crest they crossed a dirt track rising up from the main riverbank and running parallel to the dry gully they were heading for, and Anderson pointed out the remains of an old mining plant that he was using as his point of reference. From there it was a short walk down into the gully where he where he hit the targets the previous day. Their excitement rose as they scrutinised the fresh holes and scrapes in the gravelly soil – proof positive of golden toil, as if they needed any further incentive.

Since Groth was a gold virgin they agreed to give him first crack at the proven area, because there was a good chance he'd score where Anderson had the day before. You find gold where you find gold, as the old saying goes.

Leaving Groth at the primary site the other men scattered, agreeing to return in an hour or so to take stock. Anderson headed north up the gully, Schuler started prospecting down the gully towards the river, and Bidner walked through and out of the gully, and along the ridge on the far side.

After twenty minutes or so Anderson hadn't hit any gold further up the gully so he cut back to where they had left Groth, only to find Schuler working that area. Anderson asked him how it was going and Schuler answered in the negative, so they had a bit of a chat and Anderson advised him to keep at it and he should hit some targets. Then he left Schuler and headed back towards the main river, intending to work some of the likelier gullies they'd seen on their way down that morning.

Almost the instant Anderson walked out of sight, Bidner arrived at the other side of the gully. He also noticed Schuler there instead of Groth and figured correctly they'd exchanged places because Schuler owned the newer detector and had a better chance of finding gold there. Schuler was wearing headphones and facing away from Bidner so he decided against yelling out to him. Instead he squatted on his haunches and took a drink from his camel pack, watching Schuler chase a target in the dirt, his dog close by on his right-hand side.

Groth, meanwhile, had prospected his way down the gully with no luck, and climbed out onto the far side of the ridge running parallel to Schuler's gully. It was roughly the same ridgeline Bidner was on only further down gully towards the river, and closer to the homestead.

Consequently, Groth was the first to hear the vehicle. He recognised it as a Toyota diesel by the sound alone. He owned one, worked around them, knew their rattle and hum, that clear audio signature. He'd been warned about the Strubers and told they mainly drove an old, unregistered Landcruiser ute with no drop sides, and while he couldn't distinguish between models by sound alone, he wasn't about to risk detection in order to find out. There wasn't much cover so he lay flat in the dry grass, taking off his cap and laying his detector down beside him. As the vehicle passed, he raised himself on all fours and cautiously lifted his head to see the top of the cabin pass above the line of vegetation about 60 metres away. Once he thought it was safe to stand, he got up and moved deeper into the bush.

About the same time, Anderson also heard the sound of a motor and immediately panicked. He knew it could only be the Strubers. His previous two encounters with them had left him literally gun-shy, so getting caught wasn't an option. He crossed the track and frantically looked about for somewhere to hide. The approaching vehicle was now climbing the rise out of the river and would soon be upon him, and the only cover was a measly scattering of skinny trees and a few patches of dry grass. The old mining plant was off to his left but way too close to the track for his liking, so he climbed into a shallow depression and tried to disappear. His luck was in. They passed slowly within 40 metres, allowing him to catch a clear glimpse of Struber driving, and Dianne's silhouette in the passenger seat, but neither of them saw him. He knew they couldn't miss Schuler, though, because the track followed Schuler's gully line. But he decided he couldn't do anything about that so he headed for heavier cover upstream, glancing back to make sure he hadn't been spotted. By the time he reached some scrub thick enough to conceal him the vehicle had stopped, so he sat down to have a listen.

Bidner was last to hear the vehicle because he was on the other side of the gully in lightly timbered country. He eventually saw it approaching through gaps in the trees on the opposite spur and knew who it was straight away. His first thought was, "Oh shit, Struber! He's going to catch Bruce." Then he heard Schuler's dog bark and saw Dianne gesture towards the gully as if she'd seen or heard something down there. The vehicle stopped suddenly, with Bidner crouched directly across the gully a bare 100 metres away. Looking through the foliage he could see clearly as Dianne opened the door to get out. Then he watched in horror as she flicked the seat forward and took a rifle out, cocking

the weapon as she did so. At that point Bidner thought, “Shit, she’s got it. She’s got the gun,” and moved away in a brisk crouching walk, heading for cover behind a log.

A minute or two later, Groth heading for the hills, Anderson sitting in the grass, Bidner taking refuge behind his log, and Schuler and his dog Red, all heard the first gunshot. It triggered a decisive response from everyone present.

Groth, who later described the sound as “clear and very loud . . . definitely a high-powered rifle,” started jogging north, away from the scene. After a few minutes, he heard another noise, “not a gunshot but a smaller bang, like a door shutting or something being thrown in the back of a ute.” He stopped to listen for anything more but all he heard was the pounding of his own heart, so he kept on jogging. About ten minutes later, he heard a second shot as clear as the first, only this time it sounded like it came from his right, and he smelt gun smoke on the wind as well. Truly panicked by now he headed for the hills and wasn’t seen again for many hours.

When Anderson heard the first shot he guessed it to be “probably a 30/30,” which he’d seen Dianne with before. This convinced him to get moving again, and he continued quietly upstream away from the vehicle. After a short while he thought it was safe enough to sit down and have a smoke, and that’s when he heard Struber’s vehicle start up and travel a short distance further away. Then he heard the second gunshot, sharp and real, like it was fired right next to him even though he knew it wasn’t. He moved a little deeper into cover and sat quietly, hearing nothing but the sound of the wind in the trees. After a time the vehicle started up again and headed back the way it came, down the gully track and along the river towards Palmerville homestead. Anderson didn’t move.

From behind his log, Bidner thought the gunshot sounded more like a shotgun. But he wasn’t overly concerned, thinking that mad bastard Struber is up to his old tricks again, firing a warning shot before abusing you and sending you on your way. Nevertheless, Bidner also thought it was time to move on, and he ran in a crouch for 100 metres or so to the west until he reached suitable cover. From there he could hear the unmistakable sound of voices, though not what was being said. “There was a very strong wind around that day and the voices were very muffled, but they did not sound raised to me.” Then he heard a sound like “a clang, like when you throw a heavy tool on the back of a vehicle with a steel tray,” followed by the vehicle being moved a short distance. “Then maybe ten to fifteen minutes later there’s a second gunshot.” For about half an hour, Bidner sat there wondering what was going on, then thought he heard the same clanging noise again, only further away this time. Then the car started up and drove back past him towards Palmerville homestead. From his elevated vantage

point overlooking the river, Bidner caught a partial view of the top of Struber's 4WD as it passed below, but didn't have the presence of mind to stand up to see more.

Precisely what Schuler was doing at the time of the first gunshot is unknown. Alerted by Red's barking, he may have already seen the danger and started running for his life. Or he might have been standing watching in utter disbelief as Dianne aimed at him, moving only when the terrifying reality dawned, perhaps already wounded. Because he was wearing headphones and listening for signals from his machine, he may even have still been prospecting when he was hit. Indeed, he might never have seen the Strubers on the ridge above him, 60 metres away. There was no trace of Schuler's presence left at this location, beyond a few scratch marks in the dirt where he was prospecting.

About all we know for sure is shortly after Bidner left the scene there was a shot fired, which all three prospectors heard. Then Bidner heard muffled voices, and he and Groth heard a "clang" and a "smaller bang" respectively. These noises might suggest the Strubers discussed their plan of attack, before one or both of them went down into the gully to collect Schuler's detector and throw it on the tray-back. Then the vehicle was heard to move a short distance before stopping, and the second shot was heard by all three men and smelt by Groth. There was uncertainty about what else was heard at this time – Bidner thought he might have heard another clang – but after about fifteen to thirty minutes the vehicle started up again and returned the way it came. Whether Schuler was one of the passengers, alive or dead, is unknown.