

Experiments in Steam

by Graham Baker

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I have been experimenting with steam for nearly fifty years off and on and it all started in earnest about 1942. Here I must tell you the story that changed my life and gave me a dramatic awakening to the power of steam.

I was still a school boy at a small town called Mt. Molloy, on the Atherton tablehead just north of Cairns, at the height of the Coral Sea battle during the Pacific War. The Japanese were trying to locate the large airstrip twenty-five miles inland near Mareeba town. A few planes had been heard flying at night. At Molloy, a small group of the United States Air Force had been posted to spot planes and report them to the airstrip.

These men on their days off used to ride horses and, on one of these days, I had my small Stuart Turner vertical high speed steam engine running. For a boiler, I used three gallons of water in a four gallon oil drum



mounted on bricks with a wood fire. This worked well on 25 psi with a small fire.

The Air Force men were standing their horses just thirty feet in front of the engine, four of them sitting at ease in their saddles watching the engine run. I had to leave the scene for a few minutes, so I told my schoolmates to pull the fire out if the pressure rose above 25 psi. On returning from the call of nature, I was surprised to see the pressure up over 100 psi and rising and the boiler taking the shape of a pregnant pup. I instantly bent over the drum and unscrewed the safety valve to let steam out. Lucky for everyone, no one was at the rear of drum. At this moment, the bottom of the drum burst open with a roar that was heard for over a mile away. The drum had been lying horizontally and, when the end came off, it took off like a rocket just over the heads of the air force men on their horses standing half asleep as they took to their heels and bolted, throwing their riders off. We were thrown back and nearly all knocked out. If I had a movie of the whole scene, Hollywood wouldn't have been in it. The whole town rushed out thinking a Japanese 500 pounder had been dropped. Police and air force were alerted and even the sawmill stopped working as men came running from nearly a mile away to find the bomb!

Well, lucky for me and my mates, no one was hurt and I then realized the power of steam. What a way to find out! I had invented a new weapon, and nearly decimated the U.S. Air Force. When I revisit the place I still get asked by the old mates if I have made a new steam bomb. Perhaps some of the U.S. Air Force men will remember the incident. Well, so much for experience, even if one learns it the hard way.

I think the most important item to describe would