

History European

History Asian

# 'Double take'

Mona Vale resident Carolinda Witt's complicated family history led to a bombshell revelation that inspired her to write what would become an award-winning work of non-fiction.

Story by Rosamund Burton

Life Stories

When her mother died in 2007, aged nearly 88, it upset Carolinda Witt that she had no-one to tell beyond her partner, her children and her brother, plus a few friends. Her mother Tonie never knew her father; she had been brought up believing her grandmother was her mother. Tonie was in her 20s and had married Freddy Witt when her grandmother confessed, having promised never to reveal the secret, that Tonie's "sister" Dora was her real mother. Dora had been in a Tiller Girls dance troupe and, when Tonie asked who her father was, her grandmother said, "He was just a stage-door Johnny", and that Dora had made up the name, Walter Dicketts, on her birth certificate.

Tonie and Freddy Witt moved to Kenya, where Carolinda grew up. Their house, on the edge of the Nairobi National Park, was on the grounds of the property once owned by Karen Blixen, author of *Out of Africa*. The national park wasn't fenced and Carolinda describes hearing leopards prowling through the garden at night, and one killing a family dog.

Aged 12, Carolinda remembers staying in Denmark with Dora and her family. Her brother and she had a pillow fight one night, when the grown-ups were out. Later, the nanny complained to Dora she had been unable to control the two children.

"The next morning Dora told my

mother we were like wild animals, and accused her of being a bad mother," she said. "My 10-year-old brother didn't like Dora's tone to Mum.

'You bloody, Aunty Dora,' he said, confirming he was an unruly colonial child. 'Get out,' screamed Dora."

So, the Witt family packed their bags and left. Dora and Tonie never spoke again, and Tonie never told Dora she knew that she was her mother.

From aged 13 Carolinda swam for Kenya, and would have been in the squad to train for the 1972 Munich Olympics if she hadn't damaged her shoulder. The Witts moved from Kenya to South Africa, and then England. Carolinda left secretarial college at 18, then was, what she describes as, a "lousy" secretary at the British High Commission in Barbados, before crewing on a yacht in the Caribbean. Back in England she developed a passion for hot air ballooning, becoming a commercial pilot and meeting her husband, a fellow balloonist. With two small children, they moved to Australia.

(In 1988, Carolinda competed in the Trans-Australian Balloon Race, flying a Virgin Jumbo Jet-shaped balloon, and as a publicity stunt she tethered her balloon to a barge and flew it under the Sydney Harbour Bridge.)

Carolinda and her husband separated 30 years ago, and since then she has been with her partner, Andrew. They

lived in Avalon from 1991 until recently, when they moved to Mona Vale. For several years she ran a health food shop in Avalon. She also developed T5T, a modern version of an anti-aging yoga routine known as the Five Tibetans. Her book T5T The Five Tibetan Exercises was a bestseller, and T5T is practised around the world.

It was when Carolinda was rearing her own children - Holly, Joss and Tess - that her mother finally told her that Dora wasn't her aunt, but in fact her grandmother.

Over the years Carolinda had searched without success for her lost relations, then, just days after Tonie died, having lived in Avalon for the last 15 years of her life, Carolinda found a man looking for Dora Viva Guerrier, and her daughter.

"We spoke on Skype, and he said, 'I'm Mike Adair. I'm your cousin. We have the same grandfather, Walter Arthur Charles Dicketts.' I said, 'My grandfather's name was made up.' He told me it wasn't and that my mother, who'd been told she was an only child, had a brother who was given away at birth. I felt grief stricken that my mother had never known."

Carolinda's uncle, Eric Richard Dicketts, now in his late 80s, wanted to meet. However, as Mike Adair told her that her grandfather had had four wives, two mistresses and six children, was a conman and a crook, Carolinda was

suspicious about this new-found family, so she asked him to do a DNA test.

"I knocked on the door of his cottage in Wales, and this ex-RAF pilot, who'd won a Distinguished Flying Cross in World War II, opened it with a huge grin. His mannerisms and humour were identical to my mother's. We did our cheek swabs, then he asked if I'd like a gin and tonic, which was my mother's favourite drink."

Carolinda started researching her grandfather, and discovered he had enlisted for World War I aged only 15. He had several spells in prison for fraudulent activities, such as hiring Daimlers and not paying for them, and buying expensive jewellery with fake cheques. He'd also had 23 aliases, been extradited from Austria by British police, and had eloped and married a 16-year-old girl.

But Walter Dicketts was also a British double-agent with the code name Celery. When Carolinda started to unearth details about his spying activities Carolinda decided to write a book about Double Agent Celery, while simultaneously wracked with self-doubt about her ability to tell this complexed tale of intrigue and espionage. But her fear was superseded by a desire to clear her grandfather's name. The synopsis on the front of Celery's M15 file said that some people believed that he'd been "turned" by the Germans.

"The pivotal point for me writing the book was when I knew he was telling the truth."

In 1940, he had met Arthur Owens at the Marlborough pub in London's Richmond and become friends with him. However, he soon suspected his new friend was a German sympathiser, so he reported him to the authorities, little knowing Owens was both a German and British spy, and M15's first double agent, with the codename Snow.

Then M15 employed Dicketts to spy on Owens, and also, posing as a British traitor, to travel to Berlin to build a relationship with Owens' contacts in the Abwehr, Germany's military intelligence service. Dicketts underwent five days of interrogation during which he was plied with alcohol and also drugged, before he gained the trust of Snow's contact, Abwehr Chief of Air Intelligence, Major Nikolaus Ritter.

Expecting a hero's welcome by M15, when he returned to Britain, instead Dicketts found himself under further interrogation, as Owens had betrayed him, telling the Abwehr that he was a double agent, and telling M15 that he had defected to Germany and was now spying on Britain. Eventually, Dicketts' version of events was believed. Owens was imprisoned until the end of the war, and Dicketts was sent on two further missions.

Entailing thousands of hours of research, Double Agent Celery took Carolinda seven years to write before its publication in 2017. The book launch was at the Marlborough pub, where Arthur Owens and Walter Dicketts met. Attending were esteemed spy writers Michael Smith, Dr Helen Fry, and Nigel West, who wrote the foreword, and many of Dicketts' ancestors, including his two youngest sons, Richard and Robert.

"They had only ever felt ashamed of their father because of his criminal activities," Carolinda explains. "And when Nigel West described him as a patriot, who, by volunteering to go into Germany during the war, had put his life on the line, the men both cried."

In 2018, Carolinda was awarded the Society of Women Writers NSW non-fiction award, and admits she burst into tears receiving it.

"To have won the prize is fabulous. But the greatest accomplishment is reuniting the family, revealing the truth in a way which hadn't been done before, and clearing Walter Dicketts' name in history. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity to do that."

\* **Double Agent Celery: M15's Crooked Hero by Carolinda Witt is published by Pen & Sword Books Limited, RRP\$65. eBook \$34.**



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Author Carolinda; Walter Dicketts, circa 1949; family and friends at the launch of Carolinda's book; flying her Virgin hot air balloon in the 80s; on the swim team in Kenya (far left); with her mum Toni in Avalon.

