

# “Betrayed on so many levels”: How a dream Aussie holiday turned to a nightmare for the ‘drug grannies’

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It was a crime that garnered worldwide attention and polarised politicians, the public and even the [family](#) of those involved.

Two ageing American women on the trip of a lifetime [caught](#) in Australia with the largest haul of drugs ever captured. How could it not become the story on everybody’s lips?

At the time the news of the “drug grannies” arrest broke in February 1978, Sandi Logan was a 21-year-old journalist working the late shift at a Canadian newspaper.

He plucked the wire off the telex machine and was immediately captivated.

“It didn’t make any sense,” he tells *Woman’s Day* now.

“These old women involved in this major drug bust. I kept that wire in my top pocket until I moved to Australia later that year and decided to find out what had happened.”



Australian authorities found more than 4000 individually wrapped blocks of weed hidden in the vehicle.  
(Image: Supplied)

## DEVELOPING TRUST

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By then, the women, Vera “Toddie” Hays, 60, and Florice “Beezie” Bessire, 62, had been found guilty and sentenced to 14 years in jail without parole.

It was a punishment many saw as unduly harsh. They were housed at a minimum-security prison on the NSW Central Coast, where, unbeknown to Sandi, they had requested “no press”.

It wasn’t a surprise then that Sandi’s first letter went unanswered, but he persevered and in late 1979 the women agreed to a meeting with him.

“It was the start of three years of travelling to see them every weekend, sometimes midweek, too,” says Sandi. “They were very guarded at first, but we developed a trust in each other, and they told me their story.”

And what a story it was. The women, friends for decades, had never travelled before until Toddie’s beloved nephew, Vern Todd, offered them a campervan and convinced them to

drive it from Germany to India and then on to Australia.

“He played them to a tee,” says Sandi. “Toddie doted on him. She thought he was a successful actor in Australia and never had any idea he had this whole other business.”

Unknown to the friends, Vern and his accomplices secretly packed 1.9 tonnes of hashish into their van along the way. “He told them there might be a little grass in the van for personal use,” says Sandi.

“They had no idea of the truth. They were so straight up and down, the kind of people who’d throw back a fish they’d caught if it was too small.”

When they were arrested by Australian Federal Narcotics Bureau agents and the whole story unravelled, it was quickly clear who the mastermind really was.

But Vern had fled the country, and someone had to pay the price.

“Toddie’s direct quote about Vern was, ‘I hated like I’d never hated before,’” says Sandi. “She could not believe her own blood and kin could do this to her.”



Celebrating their return to the US. (Image: Supplied)

## BETRAYED ON SO MANY LEVELS

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The more Sandi got to know the greying pair, the more keenly he felt the injustice of the situation.

“Their sentence was unfair,” he says. “They’d cooperated and still got 14 years with no parole. The more I read their evidence and spoke to them, I saw it was wrong on so many levels.”

He, along with their lawyers, started fighting for the pair, tirelessly petitioning Attorney-General Peter Durack. On four occasions, Sandi thought they’d won but at the last minute something changed and, in the end, Toddie and Beezie were in jail for five years before they were granted clemency and sent home to the US.

“My wife and I went too and helped them settle in,” says Sandi. “On that first night they cooked us a roast Cornish hen. They were so grateful for their liberty.”

Despite having become very close friends, Sandi knew he was a reminder of the trauma they’d endured, and he had to leave the women to rebuild their lives.

“Sadly, Toddie died three years after her release, but I was in annual contact with Beezie until her death in 1998,” says Sandi.

With Vern also dying in 2019, having never been caught, Sandi, now 65, decided it was now or never to write a book about the story he’d played such a central role in.

“Toddie and Beezie had given me their diaries from prison. They wanted me to tell their story one day and if not now, when?” he says.

“When I started, I spoke to people who were now willing and able to talk to me about the case and I uncovered more than I ever knew at the time.”

Sandi’s book, *Betrayed*, is out now. It’s something he’s proud of and thinks Toddie and Beezie would be, too.

“They were intrinsically good people who were betrayed on so many levels,” he says.

***Betrayed* by [Sandi](#) Logan (Hachette, \$32.99)**



[Emma Levett](#)

With a career spanning across magazines, newspapers and online Emma Levett has spent much of the last 20 plus years writing about people and things that matter. Starting in business press in the UK she also freelanced at national newspapers including the Sun and the Sunday Express before making a segue into women's magazines in 2014. She has held various senior editing positions in both the UK and Australia, and was latterly deputy editor of [that's life](#)! For the last 10 years Emma has freelanced across a range of media including online platforms news.com.au, 7News.com.au and Yahoo News Australia as well as most of the major magazine mastheads; [Woman's Day](#), [New Idea](#), Marie Claire and Cosmopolitan. Interested in anything that moves the ordinary into the realms of the extraordinary she's covered stories from the Boxing Day tsunami and Port Arthur tragedy to Rosie Batty's fight against family violence and Kathleen Folbigg's release from jail.